水城正太郎 みずきしょうたろう

『東京タブロイド』シリーズ（富士見ミステリー文庫）、『せんすいかん』シリーズ（ＨＪ文庫）。『ホビー・データ』を経て、現在ライター集団『Ａ－ＴＥＡＭ』主催。唐突に「占い師になってみよう！」とアホなことを思い立ち、ちょいと占い方を勉強してみたら、毎日少しずつデータを集めなければいけないってことに気づく。もちろん、その瞬間に挫折。昔から毎日やる作業と干しシイタケだけは嫌いだったのです。

伊藤宗一 いとうそういち

兵庫県在住のイラストレーター兼漫画家。
一般向けから成年向けまで幅広く活動中。
好物は、熱血・筋肉・萌え・エロ・爺。
<一言>
『大魔王』コミック化の作画を担当させてもらうことになりました。大変光栄なのですが、震　え　が　と　ま　り　ま　せ　ん（武者的な意味で）。

カバーイラスト／伊藤宗一　装丁／西村 大

み01-02-03

水城正太郎　いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT3

ＨＪ文庫

HOBBY JAPAN

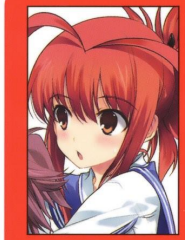
9784894257597

ISBN978-4-89425-759-7

C0193 ¥619E

1920193006193

定価：本体619円＋税



夏と言えば臨海学校！　しかし行き先の島には「魔王」と「勇者」にまつわる伝説があった。臨海学校で普通の学園生活を満喫したい阿九斗だが、曰く付きの島で無事に済むわけもなく、事件に巻き込まれてしまう。事件を裏で操る人物とは？　そして思わせぶりな態度を取り続けるころねの真意とは？　人気沸騰中の超・王・道ラブコメ＆バトルの第3弾。

HOBBY JAPAN

水城正太郎　作品

せんすいかん　その1
せんすいかん　その2
せんすいかん　その3
せんすいかん　まとめ
いちばんうしろの大魔王
いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT2
いちばんうしろの大魔王ACT3

いちばんうしろの大魔王
ACT3

海だ！
夏だ！
水着だ！
そして
ナマコだ!?

「待ってくれ、
なんの説明もなく
行ってしまうって、
どういうことだよ？」
「さようなら」

登場人物紹介

紗伊阿九斗（さいあくと）
将来「魔王」になると予言された「善良な」主人公。

服部純子（はっとりじゅんこ）
阿九斗が気になる一途で純情なクラス委員長。

江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）
阿九斗に忠誠を誓った黒魔術師。

曽我けーな（そが）
落ちこぼれな天然少女。阿九斗に懐いている。

三輪寛（みわひろし）
阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。

ころね
阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。

Prologue

That girl was as beautiful as a doll. Her green hair and green eyes caught the eye. Her well-featured face was beautiful, but no expression could be seen there.

She was a L'Isle-Adam.

That was a thinking artificial object that stood at the pinnacle of magical society. She was not just as beautiful as a doll; she was a doll. That was why the odd name of Korone suited her so well and why the odd situation she was currently in was so appropriate for her.

Korone stood tall in a field during the evening while surrounded by a screen displaying video footage. This screen was created by gathering the tiny particles in the atmosphere known as mana. It wrapped around her like a tube of translucent plastic, so from a distance, she looked like a doll inside in a tube-shaped package.

The screen displayed ten men in suits whose faces were hidden by a video effect. They were all sitting in chairs, but the chairs and walls behind them were all different. It seemed they were all being filmed in different places and displayed on the same screen.

"I believe I sent in the data for my report," spoke Korone comfortably.

However, her voice always sounded the same, so no actual emotion could be taken from it.

Whether that was a simple observation or a complaint was hard to tell, but then one of the men on the screen opened his mouth to speak. His voice was altered to hide his identity.

"Part of being human is being unable to relax unless we actually see the person's face and hear their voice from time to time."

Another man replied without waiting for Korone to say anything.

"We are of course not talking about your face, Korone-kun. We mean us. Speaking via you is a good way of coming to a consensus."

"But you are all hiding your faces and voices," pointed out Korone.

None of the men could tell if she was trying to make a joke or not, so several clicks of the tongue and bitter laughs could be heard simultaneously.

"Is an artificial human dissatisfied with the system? It only matters that we can see each other."

"Do not get so upset with her. An artificial human is a system as well. Do not forget that they have been made so they will not be completely controlled by humans. Humans have a tendency of doing atrocious things to the slaves they have complete control over. That is why artificial humans have been made to talk back and make jokes."

"I know that. And making objections is fine. Artificial humans have feelings too. And the sense of self that does not initially exist begins to appear as time passes from their creation. The principle behind this is still unknown, though."

"If I was rude, I apologize. I was only speaking the truth." said Korone indifferently. She continued to say, "However, I doubt the members of the Cabinet Secretariat gathered to discuss artificial human intellect."

"You are correct. This is about Sai Akuto."

"He has caused quite a problem by awakening Codename Black Dragon."

"Some are insisting this means he has already become the demon king."

"Those are the hardliners."

"As you know, the cabinet supervises the churches of each religion, but the control of the individual believers is not perfect due to the gods being too systemized."

"There are some idiots in the Diet who truly believe in these gods that are nothing but a system. They are intent on nothing more than improving the lives of their fellow believers."

"This is a bit off topic, but we are explaining it because an artificial human like you may find this hard to understand. What we mean is, humans will start a great commotion without bothering to check what exactly a demon king is."

"And what is a demon king?" asked Korone.

"That is a secret. We cannot tell you."

"Even though I am an artificial human?"

"Exactly. Technically, we do not even know. For us, not being able to publicly announce something is the same as not knowing it. However, we do know that Sai Akuto is not currently a demon king."

"Isn't that a contradiction? You know he is not a demon king yet you cannot announce it."

"This sort of exception exists everywhere."

"So I should just ignore it."

"Now then, on to the real issue at hand. From what I have learned, the hardliners' claims have basis. Ever since he awakened Codename Black Dragon, demonic beasts have had a great increase in activity in various places."

"It is only natural for even those who are not ignorant to wish for Sai Akuto's death."

"Even our opinions are split. A few of us have even suggested assassination."

"However, the high priest of your god Markt insists Sai Akuto deserves protection under the law as a citizen."

"It seems this confrontation will never be resolved just by talking it out."

"That is why we wish to suggest another means of resolving the situation."

"We just need to take away Sai Akuto's freedom."

"I believe arresting someone with no clear charges against them would have the same problems as assassination," commented Korone.

The members of the Cabinet Office laughed at that.

"We are men too. We know that it is possible to lose one's freedom of one's own free will."

"Please speak more clearly."

"Ha ha ha. What we mean is…"

"Sai Akuto is interested in women, is he not?"

"In the general meaning, yes," agreed Korone.

The men on the screen smiled.

"Do you still not get it? We will take away his freedom with a woman. He simply needs to become involved with one. It is not uncommon for a woman to turn a man's entire world upside down. We will control him with a woman."

"That is obscene," said Korone indifferently.

The men cleared their throats.

"We know it is."

"But we will not be leading him to commit a crime."

"The records of us doing so would remain with the god Markt, after all. We are not priests, so we do not have the authority to erase those records."

"However, this will be nothing more than romance. He will be acting of his own free will. Even if he learns we are behind it all, he will not be able to betray her. At least not once he has become involved with her."

"Yes. That is the type of personality he has."

"And so we will be taking measures to carry this out. This is only natural. It will avoid a war."

"I understand," said Korone flatly.

"Do not act like this has nothing to do with you. This is a covert mission. The order is being given to you, Korone."

"I belong to the church of Markt. I cannot obey that order."

When Korone refused, one of the men on the screen raised his hand. The hand held a single paper.

"We have approval from the church of Markt. The electronic certificate will be sent to your head."

"I take it that means I am to help with the Cabinet Office's mission as a member of the church of Markt."

"That is exactly what it means."

"Then I cannot refuse." A dull light could be seen deep in Korone's eyes. "I have received the certificate. I have also received the mission details."

Once Korone finished speaking, the men all spoke with relief in their voices.

"It seems the issue has been resolved."

"No one tried to solve the problem ahead of time with the previous war."

"This was the suggestion with the most common ground."

"He seems to be quite straight-laced, but he is still a teenage boy. This should work."

"Korone needs to make sure it does. We are leaving this up to you, Korone."

Korone nodded with no change of expression.

"I will do my very best to ensure Sai Akuto falls for the seduction."

"Excellent. Unfortunately, you will be forced to take responsibility if you fail in this mission. Do not forget that."

"Take responsibility? Will I be dismissed?"

"We need not answer now."

The screen disappeared before Korone could reply.

This left Korone standing alone in the evening field.

If anyone had seen her, they would likely have thought her expression was one of sorrow.

"Humans say we have emotions yet they do not properly understand what that means. How very strange," muttered Korone in the blowing wind.

Anyone who knew her would have been surprised if they had heard that. Her words remained indifferent, yet they were filled with powerful emotion. And as if to prove it, Korone began complaining despite there being no one to hear her.

"Seducing someone is difficult for me. And I doubt it will go well…"

Korone began trudging along in resignation.

"Even I can fall in love. Not that he would ever realize it."

Chapter 1: Let's Go on a Beach Field Trip

Part 1

Sai Akuto was troubled.

Then again, he had never not been troubled ever since it had been predicted he would become a demon king in the future. His classmates in Constant Magic Academy constantly feared him and he was caught up in some sort of trouble on a daily basis. On top of it all, he had recently made friends with a giant dragon that could only be seen as an inappropriate being to have as a friend. He felt as if he was gradually walking down the path to becoming a demon king.

He was worrying in his dorm room bed. After the day's classes, he had been summoned by his homeroom teacher Torii Mitsuko. She had given the following announcement.

"You see, we have a beach field trip coming up, but you will be staying behind, Sai-kun. Sorry."

Mitsuko-sensei usually had a very open attitude, but she had actually looked a bit apologetic this time.

"Is there no changing that?" Akuto had asked.

"Hmm, how should I put it…? There are a lot of issues going into this. You know how we would choose to forgo our sports festival if the emperor died? It's something like that… Wait. Or is it?"

When Akuto had seen Mitsuko-sensei trying to find the words, he had grasped the general situation.

"In other words, it would cause a lot of friction if I left the school, so the school has made this decision for me."

Mitsuko-sensei had clapped her hands together at that declaration.

"Yes, that. That's exactly it. It helps that you're so smart, Sai-kun. Yes."

"Being complimented like that is not going to make me happy."

"Don't be picky. And only the first years are going. The other years will still be here, so you won't be all alone. First year classes won't be held for a while, so you can just do whatever you want."

Mitsuko-sensei had irresponsibly patted Akuto on the shoulder.

"Well, it can't be helped. And missing out on the beach field trip is not enough to get too worked up over."

Akuto had shrugged.

Mitsuko-sensei had then smiled in relief.

"I'm glad. I thought you might get angry over not getting to see the girls in their swimsuits."

"Do I really look like that kind of person?"

Akuto had frowned.

He had perfectly beautiful looks, but he had been born with a harsh look in the eyes. He looked exactly like a clever villain. Mitsuko-sensei had then peered closely at that face of his.

"True. You look like the type who always has half-naked girls serving him. I suppose a swimsuit would be nothing new for you. With as much access to girls as you have, being denied for a short while should be easy."

"While I take issue with your reasoning…you are correct that this will be easy for me. At any rate, I understand the situation."

With that, Akuto had left the classroom.

However…

—Ahh, I'm never going to get a normal school life, am I?

Akuto was quite depressed. While lying in his bed, he covered his eyes with his right hand.

His personality did not match his appearance at all, but he also liked to make himself look good in front of others. He could not bring himself to say he had always wanted to go on a beach field trip.

—It isn't the swimsuits I care about. I just want a normal life… I just want to swim and… Actually, what do you even do during a beach field trip? I don't even know…

"A beach field trip is an event for one to make intimate contact with girls," said a sudden voice from very nearby.

"Wah!"

Akuto jumped up in shock. At some point, Korone had gotten close enough to stare right into his face.

This was the boys' dorm and this was Akuto's personal room, but it was normal for Korone to be here. She was Akuto's observer, so she had to be with him at all times. At night, she would sleep in the storage shelf near the ceiling. For that reason, it was normal for Korone to be near Akuto, but something was odd this time.

It was hard to explain the aura around Korone, but Akuto felt that it was different today.

"Wh-what is it?"

"An event for one to make intimate contact with girls," repeated Korone as she climbed into the bed to lie next to Akuto.

"Why are you lying next to me?"

"Because I want to. Is that a problem?"

Korone brought an arm around Akuto's chest to push his upright upper body back into the bed. She then brought her face right next to Akuto's.

He was used to seeing that ideal face, but it still made him nervous when it was that close. He could feel his heart rate increasing. Artificial humans needed to breathe in order to speak, so her breath tickled at his nose. Her breath contained a strange scent that was different from a human's.

"U-um, are you teasing me again?" asked Akuto while forcing a calm look on his face.

He had been teased like this by Korone several times in the past, so he could not help but be on his guard.

"No, I am not teasing you. If you are embarrassed, I promise to keep this a secret. No matter what you do here, I will not tell anyone. I will obscure the more emotional areas in the records for my reports."

Korone spoke with the tone of a police detective reading a suspect his rights. As she did so, she slid her hand along the top of Akuto's body. She moved it from his chest, to his belly, and then even lower…

"W-wait a second!"

Akuto grabbed her hand to stop her.

"What is it?"

"You have to ask? Please stop teasing me like this."

Akuto escaped Korone's arm, raised his upper body, and sat cross-legged. He faced Korone with a diligent expression.

Korone also sat up on the bed. However, she held her knees in her arms. She was still wearing the short skirt of the school uniform, so this pose boldly showed her panties off to Akuto.

"What is it?" Korone asked when Akuto remained silent.

Akuto shook his head and looked up and to the side.

"A-at any rate… Weren't you the one that had something to tell me? You said something about a beach field trip being an event for one to make contact with girls."

"Yes, and you can now go on the beach field trip."

Korone looked at Akuto with upturned eyes while opened and closing her legs.

"Eh?"

For an instant, Akuto stared back at Korone, not understanding what she had said. But he was quickly overpowered by Korone's gaze and looked away again. However, he spoke up in surprise when he recalled what she had said.

"Eh? I can go on the beach field trip?"

"That is correct. You can now go on the beach field trip."

"But I thought the school was keeping me from going…"

"I have taken on responsibility."

"No, you didn't have to go that far… After all, it seems rumors about me have spread beyond the school. It is only natural to take action to prevent any problems from occurring. Not to mention that this is just a beach field trip."

As Akuto grumbled, Korone spoke quietly.

"Was this only a nuisance?"

Her voice sounded somehow sorrowful, so Akuto looked back at her face.

Her green eyes were filled with rare emotion. Akuto felt those eyes were moist with tears and filled with sorrow. But before that thought could fully form within him, he started speaking.

"That is not what I meant. I am just confused because I cannot figure out why you would do this for me. Why would you go out of your way to do this?"

As he grew flustered, Korone buried her chin in her knees as if she was peeking out at Akuto.

"I heard the beach field trip is an event for one to make intimate contact with girls. I thought you might grow bolder when it comes to this if you went."

Korone pointed down. Akuto did not bother looking down at what she was pointing at. Korone still had her knees up, so if was plainly obvious what she was indicating when she pointed down between her legs.

"I-I said to stop teasing me. And I am a follower of Ko Ro. If I did that, it would block my path to priesthood."

Akuto stepped down from the bed to move away from Korone.

Korone stretched out her legs and lay down on the bed.

"I will sleep here tonight."

"No, that would be a problem."

Akuto shook his head and Korone stared at him.

"Your disinterest in girls may be a type of illness."

"Th-that is not the case."

"Then please sleep with me," she said without taking her eyes off him.

However, her tone of voice and expression remained unchanged, so Akuto honestly did not know how to respond.

—K-Korone really is acting differently from normal. She doesn't seem to be teasing me, but I can't think of any reason why she would be trying to seduce me.

"I-I'll pass."

"Why?"

"Why? B-because you're acting oddly, Korone."

"By oddly, do you mean my actions do not make me attractive as a girl?"

"Th-there is definitely something a little off about it…"

"What am I doing wrong?"

"No…I-it isn't that you are doing anything wrong. But I don't think your actions are really going to put me in the mood…"

Akuto was unsure how to argue, so he just let the conversation go where it would. He was worried how Korone would respond, but she gave up surprisingly easily.

"I see," she said before standing up and returning to her usual storage shelf.

—She isn't feeling down, is she? No, she doesn't seem the type.

Akuto was worried, but he decided to go to sleep since the bed was vacant now.

—Come to think of it, I didn't thank her for allowing me to go on the beach field trip. The conversation may have taken an odd turn, but I still need to thank her.

As he thought that, his eyelids grew heavy.

However, he was unaware of one thing. After making sure Akuto was asleep, Korone muttered to herself while watching his sleeping face.

"If he realizes I am not teasing him, will he change his mind? No, I should assume Akuto-san is correct and it is my approach that is at fault."

Korone then pulled up data from stories of the past to search for what boys liked.

Part 2

"It's morning. Wake up. If you don't, it'll be an elbow drop."

Akuto was woken by that odd statement followed by a powerful impact.

"Wah! What, what?"

He opened his eyes to find Korone straddling his body. She was staring down at him with her usual expressionless look.

"Wh-what is it?"

"It's your fault for not waking up, onii-chan. If I don't wake you up like this, you just keep sleeping. What a good-for-nothing brother," said Korone in her usual monotone voice.

"……"

Akuto always woke up early. He would wake up at around 5 for some light exercise and a shower. He looked over at the clock on his desk to find it was 4:40 AM.

—Why is she complaining that I'm not waking up this early? No, I suppose that "onii-chan" is the strangest part.

Akuto's mind had yet to fully awaken, so his blank thoughts only made it that far. However, that was not the only strange aspect of it all. Korone was wearing a childish dress. He had never seen her wear it before. Her slender body looked good in the dress, but the skirt was extremely short. Straddling Akuto left the lower half of her body almost completely visible.

"No, wait… What is going on?"

"You still aren't going to wake up, onii-chan? Then I will have to go for the Denki Anma."

While making that insane comment in an indifferent voice, Korone moved her body back while still straddling him. She then placed her sock-covered foot on Akuto's crotch.

"Wah! Wait! I'm awake!"

"It's your fault for not waking up, onii-chan. Rub rub."

"Ee! Wah wah wah!"

Akuto desperately struggled and somehow managed to escape out from under Korone.

"Wh-what is going on? You're acting weird, Korone."

While breathing erratically, Akuto balled up on the edge of the bed.

"This isn't weird at all, onii-chan."

Korone tilted her head in puzzlement. However, the gesture looked a lot like a doll with a broken head that was about to fall off.

"That's what I'm saying is weird!"

"Would onii-sama be better than onii-chan?"

"That's not the issue!"

"Then would you prefer a childhood friend from next door?"

"That's not the issue either!"

"Then what kind of girl would you be unable to resist dragging into bed with you if she came to wake you?"

"How should I know!?"

"How very selfish of you. Teenage boys are quite difficult. But it does not seem you are lying. I checked with my foot and your penis was not hard despite it being morning."

"Please don't say that kind of thing so casually…"

Akuto was utterly shocked, but he was also relieved that Korone was acting normally again.

—Thank goodness. This means she hasn't gone completely haywire. But that means she really is trying to arouse me… That is weird enough in and of itself. Is there something behind this?

He turned back toward Korone to find her opening the bag she had left on his desk and pulling out a white apron.

"Then I will try everything I have until something works. First, I will try the naked apron."

"You don't have to do this! Why do you think you do?" asked Akuto.

Korone suddenly stopped moving.

"Do you not like this?"

"Not at all!" answered Akuto reflexively.

However, Akuto grew uneasy when she did not immediately reply.

—Huh? Did I go too far?

Finally, Korone opened her mouth to speak.

"That is a problem. Hearing that from someone dear to me makes me think I am not attractive," she said slowly.

Korone always spoke so indifferently that hearing such an emotional comment from her made Akuto feel all the more uneasy.

—No, wait. Come to think of it, artificial humans do have emotions. Could she be worried that I don't like her? In that case, I cannot hurt her. However, I cannot say anything frivolous either. My only option is to give her my honest feelings.

Akuto was the type who would make the politically correct decision at times like this but would also want to make himself look good. He placed his hands on Korone's shoulders and stared her in the eye.

"I want to approach women seriously, so I cannot do it like this. But that does not mean I am not interested at all. It is just that I want a relationship of honest and pure kindness that does not rely on that other kind of thing. And I know you have those honest feelings within you. I do not know why you are doing this, but if you are worried that I do not like you, then do not worry. That is not the case at all. Also, I failed to mention it yesterday, but I am grateful that you arranged to have me go on the beach field trip. Thank you."

Korone froze in place when she heard that. It seemed she was having trouble deciding how to respond, but it was hard to distinguish it from her usual expressionlessness. At any rate, she finally replied.

"Please do not make this so troublesome. I am fine with a purely physical relationship."

"Wha-…?"

Akuto's entire body stiffened in shock when he heard that.

And then five o'clock arrived. The clock on the desk began emitting an electronic tone.

In that instant, Korone slipped from Akuto's arms and returned the apron to her bag as if nothing had happened.

"Now, if you do not hurry up with your usual exercise and shower, you will not make it in time for breakfast."

"R-right…"

Akuto nodded oddly stiffly, silenced the clock's alarm, and left the room. Korone watched Akuto leave, placed her index fingers on either cheek, and pushed them up. This created something like a smile, but her eyes were still not smiling.

"Is even a purely physical relationship off the table because I am an artificial human? Perhaps I can manage if I learn to smile… No, I cannot analyze humans, so I cannot know for sure. Perhaps I should try using non-human attraction," muttered Korone in a rare tone of worry.

Akuto's questions about the change to Korone's attitude only continued to grow. Even as he walked along the path from the dorm to school, he was oddly conscious of Korone walking behind him. At some point she had changed into a maid uniform and had even grown cat ears. It seemed she was still trying to arouse him.

"You sure are cute today, Korone-chan," said Hiroshi.

"I see. So you're into this kind of thing," commented Akuto as if it made an odd amount of sense.

"C'mon, aniki. That isn't what I meant. I just meant she's cute."

Hiroshi embarrassedly scratched at his head with the expression of a mischievous boy.

He was Miwa Hiroshi, a classmate who praised Akuto as his "aniki" despite being the same age. The boy would approach Akuto who was usually feared as a demon king, so Akuto viewed him as an important friend.

"I would say it is not just today and that I am always cute," declared Korone coolly.

"Ah ha ha. That's right."

When Hiroshi honestly laughed at that, Korone added, "But Akuto-san is ignoring that attractiveness."

"……"

The situation suddenly grew awkward. Akuto stole a glance at Hiroshi's face and it seemed the boy was beginning to realize something was odd about how Korone was acting.

"O-oh, right. It seems I can actually go on the beach field trip," said Akuto to Hiroshi in an unnatural tone of voice.

He hoped to change the subject this way because he knew Hiroshi would be delighted. However, Hiroshi's expression darkened for an instant when he heard it. That alone could have been nothing, but he then looked at Akuto and gave a forced smile.

"Th-that's great, aniki!"

"Y-yeah…"

Akuto's expression stiffened further. They were forced to walk the rest of the way to school in silence. But during morning homeroom, Akuto learned why Hiroshi had acted the way he had.

"I have a warning concerning the beach field trip: Sai Akuto-kun will now be taking part."

The class began muttering when Mitsuko-sensei gave that announcement. Akuto was used to this reaction, but it still caused a slight stir in his heart.

As if to land the finishing blow, Mitsuko-sensei then added, "We will be staying in a facility owned by the academy, so it would normally not matter who goes. However, the island this facility is on has a legend concerning the demon king. The residents of the island have passed down the following story. As an omen of the demon king's return, a demonic beast will appear from the lake at the center of this island. However, a hero will appear at that time and defeat the demonic beast. Afterwards, the hero will also defeat the demon king."

Silence fell over the class. When the muttering passed a certain point, this is what happened. Everyone turned around toward where Akuto sat in the very back of the classroom.

Akuto was unsure how to respond, but he began speaking because it would look bad if he grew flustered.

"Making such a big deal out of a legend passed down by ignorant islanders is nothing more than foolish. For one thing, the demon king war occurred only one hundred years ago. The current national system existed at that time, so there would be official records. There is no room for a legend like that to form! Also, none of the previous predictions of the future have been accurate, so this legend is completely false. I would prefer if people did not get so worked up over such things!"

Akuto slammed a fist against his desk.

His tone of voice and attitude were so over-the-top that it actually made him less persuasive, but his classmates still looked away in confusion because his actual words made a decent argument.

However, a completely different reaction came from an unexpected place. And it was quite a shock to Akuto.

"Sorry, aniki. That island is my home," said Hiroshi apologetically after turning toward Akuto.

—Oh, so that's why he reacted like that on the way to school!

Akuto panicked.

"No, I should be apologizing. I wasn't trying to mock your hometown…"

"No, it's fine. It's true that my family is ignorant," spat out Hiroshi.

This did not seem to be modesty or self-deprecation. It seemed Hiroshi really did dislike his hometown.

This bothered Akuto, but Mitsuko-sensei gave a loud warning to move the topic on to something else. When he managed to speak with Hiroshi in the dining hall at lunch, it seemed the boy held complex emotions behind it all.

"It really is a back country place. And as you said, aniki, a legend from 100 years ago is ridiculous. Some people from the time of the war are still alive today. They would know the truth. There is also no record in history of a demon king being defeated by a hero, so I can only think the islanders came up with the legend to feel better about themselves. They have nothing important, so they have this despicable desire for the hero who defeats the demon king to be from their island," said Hiroshi with a bitter expression.

It almost sounded like he was double-checking his own past rather than speaking to Akuto.

Akuto was not sure why Hiroshi was speaking like this.

"But your family lives on that island, right? Even if you think it is despicable, I'm not sure you should say it that way."

"That may be true, but it's my problem."

Hiroshi pouted his lips. Akuto would have been lying had he said this did not anger him a bit.

"I don't like that way of talking."

"Yeah, but you can't understand this problem, aniki. After all, you're powerful."

"That has nothing to do with this."

"That's not what I mean. That's not what I mean!"

Hiroshi shut his mouth as if to say he did not want to talk about it anymore. Akuto tried to speak to him again, but he quickly cleared his tableware and stood up.

—What was that? Hating your family has nothing to do with being powerful or not.

Akuto did not like it, but he decided not to worry about it because he figured Hiroshi would be over it by tomorrow.

Part 3

Akuto returned to his dorm room after school and first opened up the drawer to his desk. He stepped up onto his chair and carefully placed his foot inside the open drawer. It looked like he was trying to flip over his desk or break the drawer, but a transfer magic circle had been drawn inside the drawer. The black dragon named Peterhausen had set it up because he figured Akuto would not want to walk all the way underground every time. This meant he could climb into the drawer to travel to the demon king's underground palace below the school.

Peterhausen was the black dragon the demon king had ridden during the war. He had been sealed instead of killed and had recently been revived. He had now become Akuto's dragon, but Akuto had no intention of using him in any way. Their relationship was a delicate one.

"You should try starting a war already. It would be a good experience for you," said Peterhausen peacefully as he lay curled up like a dog.

Despite his peaceful tone, his actual words were quite dangerous. He was also 15 meters long and his body was covered in black glittering scales. All of that combined with his imposing voice made him sound like a demon servant trying to destroy the world in his spare time.

Peterhausen's bed was located in the center of the underground palace. The palace was wide and its ceiling was frighteningly high up, so it held enough space for Peterhausen to move around. This was the exact place at which Akuto and Peterhausen had fought each other. However, the dragon rarely moved from atop the pile of cushions. He seemed to like them.

Akuto stood in front of Peterhausen, gave a bitter smile, and said, "I feel bad giving you the same answer every time, but I am not a demon king. Nor do I intend to become one."

"The time will come when you will realize becoming one is the best answer." Peterhausen snorted. "Now, I doubt you came here for no reason."

Akuto nodded at the dragon's implied question.

"I have a question for you. I think it is a bit of a stupid question, but please hear me out."

Akuto then described the island legend he had heard not long before. He had thought Peterhausen would make fun of him, but the dragon listened seriously.

"Yes, that is indeed odd. It may be a mere desire as Hiroshi suggested, but one aspect interests me."

"What is that?"

"What we often call prophecies are nothing more than predictions. In other words, we can only predict the future when we have data from the past. Even the fact that you are a demon king is a prediction based on data from the past. However, a hero has never existed in the past."

"Then maybe the prediction about me is wrong too."

"Those are two different things. As for whether a hero really has existed, I can at least say that I have never fought a hero in my lifetime," said Peterhausen as he opened his eyes wide mockingly.

"I see. So the odds are good that this is just a superstition."

Akuto folded his arms.

The current imperial society had been systemized since 1000 years ago. The gods were nothing more than man-made recording devices. Following the good sense programmed into those gods provided various social services. That system had never once been destroyed. However, the people who could not understand that system that was lacking in mystery would worship the gods as literal gods. This was what ultimately led to superstitions existing alongside the system.

"What I found interesting is that this seems like a true prophecy no matter how ridiculous it sounds. Not a prediction, but a prophecy. Normally, the demon king would never visit that island…Miwa Island was it called? The previous one did not. It is a solitary island to the south, after all."

"Please do not say such ominous things. Also, why can't you tell me anything more about the previous demon king?" asked Akuto.

Peterhausen opened one eye and made an odd look. He may have meant it similar to raising an eyebrow.

"Because you refuse to become a demon king yourself."

"And I am not changing my mind on that."

Akuto sighed and placed his hands on his hips.

"I do not wish to act too roughly, so I am quietly remaining here. However, if things grow too inconvenient I may suddenly leave and begin destroying things. If that happens, there is no going back for you. You will officially be my master. Ha ha ha," laughed Peterhausen.

His breath created a whirlwind. Akuto covered his face and grimaced.

"That would be a problem. And I will soon be leaving for a little while."

"You are going to this island for a beach field trip, correct? If you are worried about this prophecy, shouldn't you stay behind?"

"I know it's just a superstition, so it doesn't matter."

"Is that so? At any rate, if it grows dangerous, call for me. I will rush to your side. That is when the war begins. I can feel it boiling up within me."

Peterhausen gave a villainous smile and Akuto sighed.

"Let's keep this peaceful."

"You too are a man of war."

"That is not something I want to hear from a dragon carrying a napping girl."

Akuto indicated something he had spotted lying almost buried in Peterhausen's side.

A few clumps of pure red hair could be seen sticking out from the lustrous black scales. They were swaying with a certain rhythm. It was the rhythm of a sleeping human. Soga Keena was napping while using Peterhausen as a pillow. Her usually relaxed face was even looser than normal. Looking at her face had a way of making one sleepy even when she was awake. Akuto could feel an effect similar to hypnotism.

"She is the first to ever approach me without fear. Even my master maintained a certain amount of tension with me," said Peterhausen in admiration.

"She does have a special personality."

Akuto shrugged. Looking at Keena's face put him in a strange mood. He was fairly certain he had met Keena when they were younger, but Keena had apparently forgotten. It was also possible it was his memory at fault.

That bizarre feeling left Akuto overly concerned with Keena. He felt like there was something special about her that he did not feel with his other friends.

—Who exactly is Keena…? Even when I try to ask her, the conversation always ends up turning in some completely different direction.

As Akuto thought, he was suddenly punched in the head from behind.

"Ow!"

"Hey, enough of that indecent look. Don't leer at girls like that."

Those words were spoken in monotone from behind him. He turned around to find Korone. For some reason, she was wearing a different school's uniform. She had her hands on her hips in a pose of anger, but he had difficulty deciding what she was doing since her face was as expressionless as ever.

"Um…? What?" asked Akuto.

Korone tilted her head.

"You do not understand? I was going for the classmate who is jealous despite not being your girlfriend. Did you feel it?"

"…Not particularly."

"That is a problem. At any rate, please stop looking at Keena-san with such an indecent look in your eyes."

"I had no such look in my eyes!" denied Akuto.

"That is fine then. I cannot have you getting along too well."

Korone moved in between Akuto and Keena. As Peterhausen watched on, he spoke up curiously.

"What are you two doing? This does not sound like the conversation of an observer artificial human and a demon king."

Korone immediately replied, "Please stay out of this. This is our problem. It is a problem between members of the opposite sex."

"Please stop talking about it like that…" said Akuto in denial, but Peterhausen grinned.

"The demon king will naturally be popular with the ladies. It makes me jealous."

"Then, Peterhausen-san, please take Keena-san," said Korone with a perfectly serious expression.

Peterhausen nodded with an equally serious expression.

"Excellent. I had taken a liking to her. She is the one that made this bed for me. We can surely make an excellent family together."

"What nonsense are you two talking about!?" loudly cut in Akuto.

As soon as he did, Korone and Peterhausen both turned toward him and froze in place. Korone was expressionless, but Peterhausen had a slight look of shock. Akuto began to wonder if he had shouted out more loudly than he had thought.

"U-um, I mean that you should ask Keena's opinion before saying that kind of thing."

Akuto waved his hands in denial as he made that confused comment.

"That was obviously a joke," said Peterhausen in annoyance.

Akuto smiled awkwardly.

"O-of course it was. I just meant it was an imprudent joke. Ah ha ha…"

"By any chance, do you love Keena-san?" asked Korone like a cross-examining attorney as she stuck her face right in front of Akuto's face.

"Wh-what do you mean by that?"

Akuto flinched back.

"I mean exactly what I said. Do you wish to form a sexual relationship with her and then marry her? Do you wish to live a life of debauchery with her in which you do nothing but repeatedly perform obscene acts with her?"

"D-don't be ridiculous…"

"No, you are not dodging this question. I am not asking if you think it would be possible; I am asking what you want deep down."

Korone moved further forward.

"Wh-why do I have to tell you what I want?"

"I wish to know your sexual preferences. Once I do, I can service you sexually."

"Wha-…!?"

Akuto could not help but be dumbfounded.

—I-I have to do something…

As he stood there frozen with sweat pouring from his body, a goddess of salvation appeared.

"What…? Why is it so loud?" asked Keena sleepily as she woke up. "Oh, A-chan and Korone-chan are here. But you mustn't be so loud. Pe-chan was trying to sleep."

She smiled and rubbed Peterhausen's head.

She had apparently started calling Peterhausen "Pe-chan". The name did not suit the dragon's frightening looks in the slightest, but it seemed he had taken a liking to it. Not only did he obediently let her rub his head, he even narrowed his eyes in a smile. Even if he could be communicated with, he was still a 15 meter beast. And in Peterhausen's case, the communication ability only made him worse. He had a wild temperament and was quite proud. He might have actually been less frightening had he not understood

language. Akuto became painfully aware that Keena was no normal person.

"Sorry about waking you. Oh, right. I'll be going on the beach field trip now."

That news caused Keena's face to light up.

"Really? Thank goodness. If you weren't going, I wasn't going to go either. But if you're going, I'll go with you. I can't wait."

Keena smiled.

"S-sure…" vaguely agreed Akuto.

He would normally have been delighted as well, but her smile felt oddly bright after what Korone had said.

"Why are you looking so love struck?" asked Korone as she jabbed Akuto's back with her elbow.

"W-wait a second. Something has been off about you since yesterday, Korone."

Akuto turned around to ask that question, but Korone immediately shook her head.

"No, there is no problem. I am only performing my duties as always."

"……"

Akuto could only fall silent at that, but he was worried about how oddly she was acting.

—There is obviously something strange going on here. I just hope it doesn't develop into anything too weird.

Akuto was growing more and more worried about the upcoming beach field trip, but Keena then pointed out something that gave him even more of a headache.

"But if I go, Pe-chan will be all alone."

"Oh, you're right."

He had never really thought about it, but only he and Keena could talk with Peterhausen who was still surrounded by mysteries. Given the dragon's

temperament, he would likely not go out of his way to do anything Akuto did not want, but if a stranger approached him in his sleep, he would not hesitate to kill that person. And the destruction could easily spread well beyond that one person.

"At the very least, we need to make sure no one comes here," said Akuto.

The palace was underneath the school. It may have been quite deep underground, but there were paths leading down to it from the school building. While it would be difficult, it was possible to work one's way here through the underground labyrinth.

"Don't worry. I have a great idea!" announced Keena confidently.

"Really?"

"Yeah, just leave it to me!"

Keena smacked her chest.

Seeing that, Akuto decided to leave the Peterhausen issue to Keena. He figured she would be able to handle it better than he could.

Part 4

But he later learned that Keena's method was extremely simple.

She asked Etou Fujiko to look after the dragon.

Fujiko was their upperclassman, so she would not go on the beach field trip. And after the recent incident, she had fallen so madly in love with Akuto that she had sworn her allegiance to him. She would never turn down a request to help him out no matter how sudden it was.

If that was all there was to it, this would not have been a problem. However, Peterhausen had nearly killed Fujiko during the aforementioned incident.

"Hyaaaaaahhhhh!"

Fujiko's legs collapsed out from under her when she saw Peterhausen. Keena had sent her a letter saying "Akuto has a favor to ask of you, so please come." She had stepped into the magic circle as instructed, but it had brought her right in front of that black dragon.

"You said you were sending for someone to look after me, but I did not expect the girl from the other day," grumbled Peterhausen sullenly.

This dragon had taken a liking to Keena. It was obvious a long black-haired beauty like Fujiko would not align with his tastes.

Meanwhile, Fujiko did not even feel like she was still alive. It was not often that one would prefer to have been thrown into a cage with a carnivorous wild animal.

"Kyaaahh! Nooooo!"

Fujiko kicked her legs around where she had collapsed out of fear, but she froze in place as soon as Peterhausen spoke to her.

"Silence, woman. Keep that up and I will kill you."

"Eeee…. U-understood…"

Fujiko began backing up while still on the floor.

"Th-then I will be going…"

"Wait. Who said you could leave?"

"Ee!"

"Akuto and Keena called you here to at least keep me entertained."

When Peterhausen called out to her, Fujiko gave an extremely stiff smile and timidly spoke.

"U-um… I was not told that… What am I supposed to do?"

"Well, Keena naps with me and tells me interesting stories. Surely you can do that."

"What?"

This request was not at all what Fujiko had been expecting. Peterhausen ignored her foolish expression and continued.

"But I have no desire to nap with someone like you. Try telling me an interesting story."

"Y-yes, understood."

Peterhausen simply wanted someone to talk to, but Fujiko was prideful and had been raised as a high-class girl. There was no chance anything she would say would be interesting.

—I-I will get back at you for this someday…

While making sure Peterhausen could not see, Fujiko secretly jotted down a note in her secret Grudge Notebook.

"Well? Out with it."

"Y-yes, right away! …Um, the saying 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' actually originates from English yet it mysteriously sounds a lot like something from rakugo."

"That is not interesting."

"O-of course. That was just a digression. Now, a hedgehog went in for marriage counseling and…"

—I-I will kill you! I swear I will kill you one day!

Fujiko hid her tears of blood and Akuto and the others left for their beach field trip the following day.

Chapter 2: Seaside Album

Part 1

The flying bus was filled with tension. The bus was large enough to hold Akuto's entire class and Mitsuko-sensei, but it was still more cramped than the classroom. In other words, if two or three people were wrapped in an odd atmosphere, everyone in the bus could not help but notice.

And of course, it was Akuto and those around him causing that odd atmosphere this time.

"I-I am telling you to stop acting so obscenely!"

The girl shouting loudly within the bus was Hattori Junko, the class representative. She possessed a beauty that could be called dignified, but she was currently complaining to Korone with her face red. It was obvious her face was red more out of embarrassment than anger due to how she was desperately trying to remain calm to hide that embarrassment.

Korone was sitting on Akuto's lap. The seats were laid out in boxes where four passengers would face each other, but Akuto, Hiroshi, Keena, Junko, and Korone were all sitting in the same box. The extra one was Korone on Akuto's lap, but no one but her saw this as a welcome intrusion. Korone was clinging to Akuto like a movie villain's mistress.

Korone was wearing a swimsuit. It was a bikini made up of very little cloth. The bottom was almost entirely made of strings above the hips. From below, it almost looked like she had simply attached a bandage to her crotch. The characteristic tail of a L'Isle-Adam tickled at Akuto's thigh. Due to Korone's slender frame, the chest of the swimsuit looked like nothing more than two tiny triangular pieces of cloth.

Korone replied to Junko's anger with her usual composure.

"You are jealous, aren't you? I understand. But do not worry. You merely need to wear this. Akuto will immediately fall for you."

Korone pulled a swimsuit out of the bag sitting on the seat to the side and held it toward Junko. It was nothing more than a single string in a Y-shape, so someone wearing it would be closer to "nude" than "practically nude".

Junko of course blushed further, stood up with a confused look in her eyes, and placed a hand on the short sword hanging from the waist of her uniform.

"I could never wear something like that! And why do I need to make him fall for me with a swimsuit!? Oh, I get it. When you say he will 'fall for me', you mean he will fall defeated after I cut him down! In that case, either he dies or I do! No, I will kill him and then die myself!"

For some reason, Junko tried to attack Akuto with her sword. He had no idea what was going on.

"Th-that isn't the case at all! Hattori-san, stop! Calm down! C'mon, Korone. This was your fault, so apologize to her!"

Akuto placed a hand on Junko's short sword to restrain her and looked over to Korone.

Korone bowed her expressionless face.

"I am sorry. But I did this out of kindness. I only suggested you sit on Akuto's lap wearing a swimsuit because it would make him hard as a rock in no time."

Now Akuto grew flustered.

"What are you talking about? Something like that is hardly enough for that."

"H-how obscene can you get!?" shouted Junko in further confusion.

But Korone remained calm.

"I only meant he would tense up from nervousness. What did you think I meant?"

"Wait…!"

Akuto and Junko froze in place.

Korone continued speaking as if to kick them while they were down.

"If imagining that was enough to make you panic this much, you must be truly innocent, Junko-san. But do not worry. Akuto-san and I will break you in sexually."

That last comment brought the tension within the bus to its peak. Their classmates began muttering amongst themselves.

"Having a girl in a swimsuit on his lap isn't enough to get him hard…"

"And the two of them are going to break in the class rep…"

"Even for a demon king, he really doesn't know when to stop, does he?"

"I get the feeling this beach field trip is going to be sexually wild…"

Akuto felt he had to do something about this. He tried to stand up to speak to his classmates, but in his haste, he forgot that Korone was still on his lap. When she began to slip down, Korone clung even tighter to him. Akuto reflexively embraced her body. This process caused the strings of Korone's swimsuit to come undone. The small scraps of cloth were now hanging down from where they were held between Akuto and Korone's bodies. They now only just barely covered the important bits.

Standing up had resulted in nothing more than showing off Korone in a state that was even more erotic than if she were nude. Even so, Akuto managed to speak.

"Everyone, please quiet down. This is no big deal. It is nothing more than the usual small commotions. The class rep does not think anything of it either."

After saying only that, Akuto sat down to fix Korone's swimsuit, but he finally realized what he had actually said when he saw Junko's expression and heard the muttering coming from the rest of the bus.

"I see. He does this kind of thing all the time, so he doesn't see it as a big deal."

"And the class rep was only jealous. It's exhibitionism."

Akuto fell silent because he had no idea what to say.

—Now I've done it… And I was hoping this would be an enjoyable field trip. Ah, why do I always do such foolish things?

He looked over at Junko, but she turned her head to look out the window and did not so much as budge.

He glanced to Hiroshi who sat beside him. He was not hoping the boy could help him out here. He was worried how Hiroshi had been so oddly silent despite usually causing the biggest commotion at times like this.

Hiroshi looked like he was lost in thought and was not even looking toward Akuto.

—He must be worried about that legend. What kind of field trip is this going to be?

The only person without a dark look on their face was Keena.

"A-chan, you shouldn't tease girls too much." It was unclear if she actually knew what was going on, but she offered a snack to Akuto. "These rice crackers have strictly selected rice and were hand-cooked one at a time."

"Amazing."

Akuto had no interest in the rice crackers, but he took one from Keena since he doubted anyone else would talk with him at the moment.

But then Korone swiped the rice cracker just before he put it in his mouth. She tossed it into her mouth and began munching on it.

—Wh-what is she trying to do?

Akuto could not help but feel an even deeper mystery in Korone's odd action.

But then he was finally freed from that painful space.

"There's the island," someone said.

Akuto reflexively looked out the window.

In the middle of the cobalt blue ocean floated a large ring colored with a bit of green. It was a coral reef. In the center of that was a small island with white beaches along the edges. It looked like the ideal image of a tropical paradise.

"It's so pretty," muttered Junko, having forgotten all about her bad mood.

"It really is," agreed Akuto honestly.

He had grown up in such harsh circumstances that this was the first time he had ever seen a tropical island firsthand. It was quite moving for him.

On the other hand, when Hiroshi heard all this, he did not even bother looking out the window.

He instead muttered, "This island was made from a change in the earth's crust just under 100 years ago. The coral and forests were moved here. Everything here was made according to a plan. It's truly pathetic."

That comment dampened the mood in the bus.

"You don't have to say it like that," said Akuto quietly while being careful he did not sound angry.

Hiroshi shook his head as if he only just realized what he had said.

"Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

Hiroshi may have apologized, but this actually made it harder for Akuto to speak to him.

Only Akuto's box was left in silence. The other classmates were filled with excitement.

Finally, the flying bus came to a stop on the island's beach. When the door opened, the students rushed to be the first out onto the beach while not listening Mitsuko-sensei's instructions.

Akuto stepped out onto the beach last. The scenery before him made a great contrast due to the bright sun. The waves broke calmly on the beach as the palm trees cast their shadows on the sand. He had seen the beach from above, but actually standing on it made it hit home that this was a different place from normal.

—Artificially made or not, this is a nice place.

With that thought, Akuto looked over toward Hiroshi, but the boy was still looking gloomy. It was not so much that Akuto found this unpleasant and more that he was disappointed they could not enjoy the scenery together. Keena was of course celebrating and Junko was smiling now, so it was sad that only Hiroshi could not share that feeling.

"Hey," he started to say to Hiroshi, but he suddenly felt a malicious gaze.

Akuto reflexively looked over. He felt as if someone was watching him from the forest beyond the beach, but he could not see anyone there even when he strained his eyes.

—Did I imagine that? I suppose it isn't like we would be unwelcome. The academy holds a beach field trip here every year.

Mitsuko-sensei then called to have the class gather.

"We will now move to the lodging facility. I have some advice for you, so listen up!"

In the end, Akuto was not able to talk to Hiroshi. Akuto and the others all moved to gather by Mitsuko-sensei.

They walked along a small path leading from the beach and toward a small three-story building. The outside was built to resemble a Japanese-style inn, but it had "Constant Magic Academy Lodging Facility" written on it. It was used for the beach field trip and training camps for different clubs. As they walked along the path, Akuto looked to the side, but he only saw a few tile-roofed houses a short distance away. The town seemed to be in that direction.

—Is that Hiroshi's hometown?

However, Akuto found it difficult to ask Hiroshi directly. The fact that the place looked completely deserted and that no one had been visible even when looking down on it from the flying bus made it even harder to ask.

When they entered the lodging facility, Mitsuko-sensei called Akuto over. He followed her curiously and it turned out a private room had been prepared for him.

"I thought everyone else was staying in two large rooms," complained Akuto.

"It can't be helped," said Mitsuko-sensei with a smile. "Just be glad you were able to come at all. And this means you can bring a girl in there with you. Good luck."

"Good luck with what…?" grumbled Akuto, but then he realized Mitsuko-sensei might know something about Hiroshi.

"By the way, sensei, I heard this is Hiroshi's hometown."

Mitsuko-sensei's expression changed to something that seemed to have some hidden meaning.

"It is. But it seems he does not like it much. It may be the rebellion that a lot of teenagers get."

"I do not understand why anyone would dislike their hometown."

"That's because you don't have a hometown. But others might not understand how you feel about it, so…well…be careful of what you say."

Mitsuko-sensei smiled once more.

"Is that so?" said Akuto, but he did not actually understand what she meant.

"Well, since you're here, you should have some fun without worrying about everything so much," added Mitsuko-sensei with a wink.

Part 2

Each class held around 30 students and the first year went up to Class F, so a total of 180 students had come to the island. Despite the great number of people, the beach was plenty large for the students to have room to enjoy themselves.

Akuto spread out a sheet in the shade of some rocks a short distance from everyone else. He sat on that sheet while Keena lay beneath a parasol nearby.

Keena was wearing a two-piece swimsuit and was kicking her feet around in enjoyment while lying face down.

"Just sitting out here is fun," said Keena with a smile to Akuto.

Akuto had trouble deciding what expression to give in return. Keena had to strip down naked to use her invisibility magic, so he was actually fairly used to seeing her naked. However, he was still unsure where to look when she smiled at him while lying so nearby in that outfit that showed off her body lines. He put on a vague expression and Keena began tickling his exposed knee.

"Wah!"

"C'mon, you're supposed to be enjoying yourself. Or were you entranced by my swimsuit? Heh heh heh," laughed Keena.

He had heard more than enough of those jokes from Korone, but the difference in nuance when it came from Keena made him blush.

"Your face and body are a bit too childish for that," said Akuto to keep up appearances, but Keena puffed out her cheeks.

"What's wrong with that? It just means I have room to grow."

"I hope your mind grows up, too," said Akuto with a smile and Keena smiled back.

"Are you sure? Once I grow up, I'll have complete control over you."

She spoke mischievously, but Akuto felt his heart skip a beat for some reason. He felt more truth in it than if anyone else had said it.

—I really do feel like Keena is different from the other girls.

As he thought that, something suddenly leaned up against him from behind.

"Wh-what?"

He turned around in shock at the sudden feeling of skin. Korone was clinging to his back.

"Will you help me put on sunscreen?"

"What?" replied Akuto out of surprise at this sudden request.

Korone had changed swimsuits. For some reason, she was now wearing the school swimsuit used by the academy's middle school. It suited her body very well, but it seemed out of place here. It even had her name written on the chest.

Akuto was bewildered, but Korone lay down between him and Keena.

"Will you help me put on sunscreen?" she repeated.

She removed a bottle of sunscreen from her bag and handed it to Akuto.

"…Can L'Isle-Adams even get sunburns?"

"Look carefully at the package."

He looked at the sunscreen's package to find the words <L'Isle-Adam sunscreen. Keeps the harsh rays of the sun from peeling off your coating and keeps the salt out of your body when you enter the ocean!>

"So it's like car wax… But wait. You can't put this on with that swimsuit on," commented Akuto.

"That is not a problem," assured Korone. "While it does need to be applied to the skin below the swimsuit, you can stick your hand inside the swimsuit. See? This swimsuit opens up down here. That makes it easy to stick your hand inside."

Korone rolled over onto her back, pinched the fabric at the bottom of her belly, and lifted it up. The front of the swimsuit did indeed open, revealing a glimpse of beautiful skin below that was the color of white porcelain.

"No, wait a second. I-I can't exactly stick my hand in there."

Akuto naturally refused. He looked over to find a rare displeased look on Keena's face.

—That's right. Even she is starting to notice Korone is acting weird.

As Akuto remained confused, Korone suddenly sat up. She slid her swimsuit from her shoulders and then down to her waist.

"Wah!"

For an instant, Akuto saw Korone's breasts. He frantically looked away, but Korone did not try to hide her body.

"It is so cute that you flinch back from simple nudity. I removed the swimsuit to make the sunscreen easier to apply. Now, please touch my breasts."

Korone grabbed Akuto's hand and began leading it toward her breast.

"W-wait a second…"

Akuto resisted. However, he could not knock Korone away or act at all violently, so he only averted his gaze and kept his arm stiffly in place.

"W-wait…"

Akuto was panicking, but then a he received a violent blow to the back of the head that, for once, he was thankful for.

"Wh-what are you doing, you pervert!?"

Akuto turned around to find Junko clenching her fist with a blush on her face. She wore a one piece swimsuit with so little decoration that it looked like a racing swimsuit.

"Th-thanks. You actually saved me this time."

Akuto moved away from Korone.

"Wh-why are you thanking me?"

Junko was confused by Akuto's odd reaction, but she still crouched down in front of Korone and fixed her swimsuit. Korone obediently let her do so.

"Honestly, what are you doing in front of Keena? …Oh, right. I came to tell you that Miwa has gone to visit his parents," said Junko after putting Korone's swimsuit back on and standing up.

"I see. So that's why I didn't see him. He was acting oddly, so I hope he's okay."

"Mitsuko-sensei is trying to tread carefully. That may be why she asked me to tell you. Now, that was all I came here for, so I will be going."

Junko began to leave, but Akuto grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Wait. How about you swim with me?"

Akuto wanted to escape Korone for a while and he felt this would be a good opportunity to apologize for what happened on the bus.

"Eh…?" Junko smiled for an instant, but her expression quickly stiffened and she looked away. "I have no obligation to go along with that. How can you constantly act like some kind of lady-killer and then want to play when it is convenient to you?"

"If you are still mad about what happened on the bus, I apologize. I would like to argue that was due to Korone's comment, but I need to have more discretion in general. I have learned my lesson."

Akuto obediently bowed his head.

Junko looked like she was barely able to hold back a smile.

"Y-you leave me no choice. If you have learned your lesson, I can play with you for a little bit. It would be sad if you had no friends now that Miwa is gone."

"Thanks. I have never actually just had fun like this before. I would appreciate it if you could teach me what I am supposed to do," said Akuto with a serious expression.

His expression seemed to tell Junko that he really did mean it when he said that. She burst out laughing without thinking and then returned Akuto's serious expression.

"What is wrong with your personality? You just need to enjoy yourself. Wait, what are you making me say? This is not exactly my area of expertise either."

Keena had been watching this exchange in amusement, so Junko grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet.

"You come, too. You cannot stay out of the water after coming this far."

"Okay," agreed Keena energetically.

Before walking off, Keena looked over at Korone, but it seemed the L'Isle-Adam had decided to remain behind. She was sitting unmoving atop the sheet.

The three of them arrived at the edge of the beach, but stopped where the waves would wash up over their feet. It looked like they were waiting to see who would enter the ocean first.

"Entering the ocean first…"

"…seems like it takes serious resolution, doesn't it?"

Junko and Keena smiled at each other.

"Do they have some psychological opposition to getting wet?" wondered Akuto as he entered the ocean ahead of them.

Once he was waist-deep, he turned around to find Junko and Keena still stopped at the edge of the water.

"What are you doing? Aren't you coming?" he asked.

Keena's laughing voice replied, "A-chan, this tickles and is a lot of fun!"

Keena was pointing at her feet.

"The sand is being taken away by the waves, but it feels like it is shifting beneath my feet," commented Junko as her feet squirmed.

Seeing that, Akuto smiled and said, "I didn't expect to see you doing something like this, Hattori-san."

"D-don't be silly. I am not acting childish!"

Junko shook her head and trudged into the ocean.

"Ah, Junko-chan! Wait!"

Keena followed her.

"And asking me to swim with you with that upset look…"

Junko approached Akuto, scooped up some seawater, and splashed it at his face.

"…is childish too!"

"Wah!"

Akuto shook his now-wet head and sent water spraying everywhere.

"I can't help it if I never got to have a water fight with anyone when I was a kid!"

Akuto splashed water back. It splashed down on Junko's head and left her soaking wet.

They exchanged a glance and began laughing.

"Ah! No fair having fun without me!"

Keena jumped at Akuto and Junko and knocked them both into the water.

"Wah!" shouted Akuto even as a certain feeling of completeness filled his chest for the first time.

—I never even imagined I would get to enjoy a normal school life like this. I'm glad I didn't die in some horrible accident or something.

"Why are you grinning like that!? That is completely inappropriate!" shouted Junko half-jokingly as she pushed Akuto down into the ocean.

Normally when Junko said something like that, it was followed by a legit punch, but she was surprisingly gentle this time. Akuto gave a half-hearted struggle, waited for the best timing, dove down, and scooped up Junko's legs. Junko let out a scream and sank into the ocean.

"Hey, hey," called Keena as they were playing.

Akuto and Junko stopped and looked over.

"Hey, what's this? They're all over the bottom of the ocean here!"

With a smile, Keena held out what she was holding.

It was a dark brown cylindrical object that was the perfect size to hold in the hand. Its surface was slimy and it was covered with a pattern similar to a python.

"I think that's a leopard sea cucumber. I've seen pictures of them before," said Akuto with a nod.

"I see. So it's a sea cucumber! It's so slimy and firm. It feels so funny!"

Keena smiled innocently as she began playing with the cylindrical creature by rubbing up and down with the hand holding it.

"Y-you probably shouldn't play with it like that…right?"

Akuto looked over at Junko with a bitter grin, but Junko backed up as if afraid of the sea cucumber in Keena's hand.

"K-keep that thing away from me."

"Hattori-san, do you not like this kind of thing?" asked Akuto and she nodded without looking over at him.

"Y-yes. I do not like slimy things like frogs."

Junko's gaze was fixed on the sea cucumber. She was likely afraid Keena would throw it at her. Picking up on that, Akuto warned Keena.

"C'mon, Hattori-san says she doesn't like it, so don't hold it out toward her like that."

Keena obediently nodded.

"Okay!"

But in that instant, Keena seemed to tighten her grip. Something white shot out the end of the sea cucumber's body. It looked like strings of sticky liquid.

—Oh, come to think of it, I've heard that some of a sea cucumbers' insides can easily burst out. That must be what happened.

Akuto was oddly impressed by this, but when he saw where those insides had gone, he quickly realized this was hardly the time.

That white sticky stuff splattered all over Junko's face.

"Eeee! Kyaaahh!"

Junko screamed and leapt up and out of the water with the ninja strength that she had not used while they were playing. She made it back to the beach in almost no time.

"See? You shouldn't do that," warned Akuto.

"Sorry," apologized Keena obediently as she toyed with the sea cucumber in her hand.

"I'll go after her," said Akuto before returning to the beach.

He followed Junko's footsteps and found her quite quickly. She was hiding behind some rocks and desperately trying to remove the white stuff stuck to her face.

"Hattori-san, are you okay?"

Akuto walked over and Junko rushed over to him with tears in her eyes.

"P-please get this off! It's so sticky!"

With Junko embracing him, her face was extremely close by. Her features gave a rather sharp impression, but it was now distorted by the shock and the sticky white stuff.

"I-I will. Don't move."

Akuto carefully moved his fingers across her face. It seemed to be some sort of white fiber stuck on her face. He diligently pinched them between his fingers and removed them one at a time.

"This shouldn't be poisonous, so you'll be fine. Good, your face is not swollen," said Akuto to put her at ease.

"R-really? At any rate, hurry up and get it all off."

Junko must have lost control of herself because she was frantically clinging to him. This made it difficult to move his hand across her face, so he touched her arm with his other hand.

"Hey, I know you are scared, but move away just a bit."

Junko's face visibly reddened and she slowly removed her arms from Akuto's body.

"D-do not make any ridiculous misunderstandings about this."

"I know. You were only scared, right?"

"Th-that is not it, you idiot! I would never rely on you even if I was afraid."

"I know that too, but just calm down. The way you were while playing in the ocean was exactly how you were when I first met you. It feels like you put too much effort into being perfect at school," said Akuto without really thinking.

Junko began fidgeting and looked toward him accusingly.

"Why would you say that…? E-embarrassing me like that makes it hard to stay sitting here. I-I only showed that side of myself to you. And I was feeling relieved because of all the strange things you usually do."

"I try to always act normally. It is those around me that do the strange things."

"Then maybe you were just strange from the beginning."

"In that case, there's nothing I can do… Oh, that's the last of it."

Akuto flicked the last strand of sea cucumber innards from his finger.

Junko looked somehow disappointed. Despite trying to move away earlier, she stayed put and looked up at Akuto.

"What is it?" he asked.

Junko shook her head as if she had been seen doing something wrong.

"N-no… I was just thinking that I had not thanked you…"

"This isn't worth thanking me over. And this was Keena's fault."

"I-if Keena did it, then it is not your responsibility."

"True, but I get the feeling that I'm her supervisor or something."

Akuto smiled, but Junko's expression was unexpectedly serious.

"Y-you refer to Keena by her given name. I-I am also your friend, so why do you refer to me by my family name?"

When she finished speaking, Junko lowered her face.

"W-well, you take everything so seriously, Hattori-san, so it just seemed appropriate…"

Akuto grew flustered due to his confusion and some intense feeling filling his chest.

—But if Hattori-san is willing to show me this side of her, then maybe I need a new way to refer to her. That's only polite.

"Junko…-san."

After he spoke that with some degree of embarrassment, Junko raised her head and began mumbling something.

"A-Aku-…"

As soon as she got that far, something happened so suddenly that Akuto did not immediately realize what it was. And it had to have been even more sudden for Junko.

At some point, Korone had snuck up behind Junko. With her usual expressionless look, Korone had grabbed the shoulders of Junko's swimsuit and pulled it down to her belly.

"Eh?"

"What?"

Both Akuto and Junko were at a loss for words. They were unable to move for a short while. For that reason, Junko's defenseless and bare upper body was exposed before Akuto's eyes for a full three seconds.

"Ah…"

"H-…"

Junko finally caught on to what had happened.

"Hyaaaahh!"

She screamed and curled up her body.

"W-wait! What are you doing, Korone!?" asked Akuto, but Korone replied calmly.

"I thought I would help create a decent mood."

"Don't lie. Why would you do something so cruel?" criticized Akuto, but it seemed Korone did not understand. Akuto could not help but grow angry. "Even if you are my observer, this is not acceptable. In fact, an observer

shouldn't be a nuisance to those around me. You aren't actually our classmate, so you should not be causing problems like this."

"You are right. I am not your classmate. Our relationship is one of observer and observation target," said Korone plainly.

However, the plainness of her tone was somehow different.

—Huh?

And Akuto picked up on this oddity. Unlike normal, this plainness actually held emotion.

"It may have been a mistake to try to interfere with you. However, this was only my inability to do so properly. I did not intend any harm," muttered Korone quietly.

"W-wait…"

This change made Akuto panic, but Korone only continued speaking in her plain yet somehow sad voice.

"Please do not worry about me. This was my fault. The one thing I do not want you to forget is that I wish to remain by your side."

"Eh? Eh?"

This sudden confession confused Akuto. Korone turned around and walked off before he could say anything more.

Junko was also confused by Korone's attitude. After fixing her swimsuit and quickly getting over her poisonous mood, she watched Korone leave.

"Wh-what is with Korone?"

"I don't know…"

"S-something definitely is not right. Especially that last comment. Is it possible that Korone lov-…"

Junko's confused words were drowned out by an even louder voice.

"A-chan! This is so weird! There are a whole bunch of sea cucumbers!"

Keena came splashing up from the ocean.

Junko jumped in shock when she heard the term "sea cucumbers".

"Wah! Keena, don't bring the sea cucumbers over here!" shouted Akuto, but Keena gave no reply.

Shortly thereafter, a sea cucumber of a different color than the previous one flew over the rock behind Akuto and Junko. Junko screamed and Akuto frantically worked to knock away the sea cucumber while calming Junko. In the end, their conversation was never continued. They later asked Keena why she had done that.

"That sea cucumber was a different color, so I thought Junko-chan might be fine with it!" she had replied cheerfully.

Part 3

While his classmates had fun on the beach, Hiroshi visited his hometown.

He took the small road alongside the academy's lodging facility to enter the village. Only a few small tile-roofed houses lined the road, so it did not have the unity of a normal village. However, the effort put into the roads connecting the houses showed how much the villagers loved the land.

Oddly, the village seemed completely deserted as Hiroshi trudged home, but he had a hunch as to why.

—This is why I didn't want to do this. Honestly, I can't believe an entire village is refusing to come out for fear of the demon king.

With that bitter thought, Hiroshi tried to open the door to his home. It was locked which irritated him. The village had a habit of never locking its doors.

"Mom, I'm home," he called out.

Only then was the door unlocked from the inside.

"Welcome home. You must be exhausted."

His mother welcomed him in with a cheerful voice, so he could not remain in an entirely bad mood.

"Good to see you, mom."

He may have had his issues, but family was family. Just entering the front door made him feel at home.

His father and younger sister came out too. For some reason, his parents began putting their shoes on at the entrance.

"What is it? Are you going somewhere?"

"You are going too. A party is being held for you at the public hall," said his father in a tone that said, "Don't ask the obvious."

"W-wait. At least let me get some tea first."

"I said a party is being held for you. And we cannot leave the front door open. Now hurry."

His father quickly stood up and left.

His mother must have felt there was no helping it because she gave Hiroshi a bitter grin.

"Nothing is going to change that about him."

Hiroshi gave no reply, but she still turned and followed his father. His little sister Yukiko then pulled on his pants. She was a fair bit younger than him, so she was only 11.

"Welcome back, onii-chan."

"Thanks."

"Everyone started preparing to welcome you back when they heard you were coming."

"I see. That's amazing," he replied halfheartedly.

However, Hiroshi's heart was heavy. The village had no other youth, so this welcome party would only be for the benefit of the villagers. As expected, the public hall was filled with old men whose faces were reddened by alcohol.

"Oh, the future hero has returned."

"With you here, the village is sure to be safe."

The old villagers called out to him jokingly. A banner was hanging down from the ceiling.

It read <Welcome, future priest>

It took all of Hiroshi's effort not to look displeased. He was given food and drink, but he paid no attention to what any of it tasted like. He chatted with a halfhearted forced smile, but the others quickly lost interest in him and began discussing pointless topics.

—In the end, they're only treating me kindly because I might become a priest one day.

Hiroshi's idea was not that farfetched. The villagers were being quite blatant about it. They had jokingly asked him to do something for the village ever since he had decided to enroll in Constant Magic Academy. Some had even secretly asked him for direct help with their business because they were having difficulties. Even someone like Hiroshi did not enjoy seeing that unpleasant side of things.

The party showed no sign of ending, so Hiroshi claimed he had to leave for something related to school. In the end, he never managed to just relax at home. His parents must have been enjoying the socialization because they did not see him off. Only his sister Yukiko came with him.

"Hey, is it true there's a demon king at your school?" asked Yukiko as soon as they left the public hall.

"Not of the kind everyone thinks there is," denied Hiroshi.

"Everyone's scared. They say there's some kind of legend."

"That's a lie."

Hiroshi circled around to the back of the public hall in search of somewhere to sit and talk with Yukiko. Some bricks were piled up near the window to make a flower bed which created the perfect spot. He sat there next to Yukiko.

"But at night, there are strange sounds, strange people walking on the roads, and a ghost's voice in the distance," said Yukiko with a perfectly serious expression.

Hiroshi doubted she was lying, but he assumed it was a childish misunderstanding.

"It only sounds that way because you're afraid."

"So there really is no demon king? I'm too old to be afraid of ghosts, but the grownups all say the demon king really exists."

"There is someone who is called a demon king."

From what Yukiko had said, it seemed rumors of Akuto had spread quite far. It would have been difficult to say the demon king did not exist at all.

"But he is not the kind of demon king everyone is afraid of."

"What do you mean?"

"He isn't a scary person. He's my friend."

"Really? Amazing, onii-chan!"

Yukiko looked up at Hiroshi with a look of respect.

"So you don't have to be scared, right?"

"Right!" said Yukiko with a nod.

At that point, they heard a voice from behind them. It came from the back wall of the public hall. The back had been made into a smoking area, so the villagers who smoked had gathered there.

"Miwa's son really is a weakling."

"Yeah. From the look of him, his grades at school probably aren't all that great. Magic is about the effort you put into it after all."

Hiroshi could hear the voices clearly from outside, but the speakers did not seem to realize it. If they continued speaking, the topic would clearly turn in a very bad direction, but moving would alert the speakers of their presence.

"But the village's future is dark if he doesn't become a priest."

"Having just one priest is supposed to give you a whole lot more aid money. And he can become a priest as long as he graduates from that school, right? A high priest is a different matter of course."

"But there's that rumor about a demon king at the school."

"Yeah, apparently it's true. I hear he's caused all sorts of trouble at the school. Some say he's already taken control of the place. I don't believe in the island's legend, but a demon king can easily exist if you just think of one as someone with powerful magic who rebels."

"True, and the students of that school have always been a wild bunch. I heard their student council president destroyed a group of knights."

"I can't believe we let them into the village. I'm starting to think we really do need a hero."

"The demonic beast and the hero are nothing but lies, but Miwa really does believe his son is the hero. Ah ha ha ha."

"Ee hee hee hee hee. Impossible. He's always been a complete coward. He's the only one who grew up here yet didn't learn to swim. He'd always start crying if anything happened and would even piss himself if you scared him."

When he heard those laughing voices, Hiroshi felt as if something heavy had been embedded in his gut. His face twisted into what did not quite look like anger or shame. He felt tears trying to work their way out, but he had to resist while his little sister was watching.

After he was sure the two speakers had finished smoking and left, Hiroshi stood up.

"Onii-chan…" said Yukiko worriedly.

Hiroshi showed her a smile and said, "The villagers don't understand the truth. And that's why you need to understand the truth, Yukiko."

Hiroshi and Yukiko walked home in silence. Yukiko looked worried, but Hiroshi was forced to part ways at the house because he had to return to the lodging facility.

On his way back from his house, a few tears managed to escape, so he stopped to wipe them off.

As he did, he thought he heard a distant roar. He turned around and realized a low rumbling was coming from the mountain in the middle of the island.

Hiroshi was actually very knowledgeable about the island's legend. A lake was located at the foot of the mountain and that lake marked the exact center of the island. The demonic beast was said to come from there and the hero's supposed weapon was located quite nearby. However, he also knew better than anyone that both were tricks. That roar he had heard was a fake.

—If that demonic beast actually exists, I hope it really does destroy the village. Not that there's any chance it does exist.

That was what Hiroshi truly thought.

Part 4

Akuto had suddenly realized someone was watching him. He had noticed it in a thicket while walking back from the beach and he had noticed it out the window while arranging his luggage in his room at the lodging facility. He had felt a gaze that was clearly not from anyone he knew.

He felt as if his sense for this had grown sharper recently. It was possible his ability to sense mana had increased. If so, it may not have been his imagination that some unknown person was monitoring him.

—Maybe I should figure out who it is before this causes a problem for anyone else.

Akuto intentionally walked out of the front of the lodging facility before dinner. When he felt the gaze once more, he made up of his mind. During the free time after dinner, he took his shoes back to his room so he could sneak out the window. When he opened the window to leave, he found Korone's face. She was standing outside the window.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. There is simply something that is bothering me," said Korone.

"Bothering you?"

"Someone is poking around your surroundings."

Korone had been acting oddly lately, but Akuto knew he could trust her about this sort of thing.

"That was bothering me too. I was thinking of pursuing them."

"I hope there is no danger, but if you are going, then I will go with you," agreed Korone.

Chapter 3: A Surprise in a Dark Forest?

Part 1

"If you can sense this person's gaze, your mana detection ability must be improving," said Korone.

That matched what Akuto had been thinking.

"Does that mean I can detect the mana in people's bodies?"

"Yes. Humans can detect and remember the subtle differences in the mana pattern within an individual. That allows one to detect a hidden individual using the sense commonly referred to as intuition."

"Then this feeling that someone is watching me is real…?"

"My sensors have detected it as well. It is not your imagination."

Korone pointed to the sensor in her hand. What looked like a pocket watch displayed a glowing radar screen.

"This is a mana detection radar. It can trace movements in mana. However, a skilled magic user can hide the mana reactions caused by the changes in their internal mana and it has difficulty detecting those with only a small amount of mana. It may be of little use in most situations, but it seems to be helpful here."

A small dot of light was displayed over the map on the screen Korone showed him. The dot was located very nearby.

"So we just have to pursue this dot."

Akuto began walking in the direction of the dot. He was forced to brush the branches and underbrush aside to make a path, but he could still make forward progress. However, it was dark in the forest at night, so he borrowed a light from Korone and shined it forward. Once he did, the thicket moved and produced a rustling sound. Something was definitely there.

"There they are."

Akuto began running. The movement in the thicket began moving away. It moved surprisingly fast. Akuto's footing was uncertain and he did not know

the land, but he still ran as quickly as he could. However, he eventually lost sight of the movement.

"Let me see the radar."

Akuto started to grow out of breath as Korone reached her hand forward from behind.

She showed him the radar screen and said, "This is strange. I can no longer detect the person."

"What?"

Akuto looked closely at the screen and he could tell something was wrong. Not only was the dot gone, but the entire map was no longer being displayed.

"Did it break?" he asked, but Korone shook her head.

"The mana is being disturbed. It is interfering with any device that uses mana."

"Are you okay?"

"I have switched over to a mode where I do not exchange mana with the external world."

"That's good. …But this means we lost sight of them."

"So it seems. Our exact location is also unclear."

"So we're lost?"

"No. I memorized the landscape on our way here. As long as you are with me, you will be fine."

"Then let's head back."

Akuto gave up on tracking this person.

However, he then felt an eerie chill on the back of his neck.

He immediately spun around, but found nothing.

It seemed Korone had sensed it as well. She brought a hand to her ear as if listening for some sound.

"What is it?"

"I heard someone fleeing. Let us pursue this person a bit further. I can see in the dark, so I can track this person by sight to a certain extent."

Without waiting for agreement, Korone suddenly ran off.

"Eh? Wait!"

Akuto frantically tried to pursue, but Korone only continued to accelerate.

Akuto had nothing but a single light in that dark forest. He gradually trailed further and further behind Korone and had no idea where he was.

Finally, he gave up on running.

"What a pain… But Korone should return after a while."

Akuto found a random tree, sat down, and leaned up against it.

This was the first time Korone had run off and left him behind. He had thought she was acting more normally here, but it seemed she was still acting oddly.

—But without Korone, I think I would have a lot of trouble. Korone has become almost necessary for me…

Akuto thought vaguely about that.

And then he heard a rustling from a nearby thicket.

Part 2

Shortly before Akuto and Korone began pursuing this mysterious person, Fujiko was below Constant Magic Academy with Peterhausen. However, she was not having a great struggle.

"That is right! Akuto-sama shall be an absolute ruler and I shall be his queen! Those who oppose us shall be thrown into a pool of poisonous snakes and the two of us shall enjoy dinner and sip on blood wine while watching it all! That is my dream!"

Fujiko spoke excitedly and Peterhausen listened in satisfaction.

"At night, all the beautiful women of the country shall be gathered, stripped naked, and made to seduce Akuto-sama! But he shall of course have eyes for no one but me! He shall take only me to bed with him! As the women cry out in jealousy, he shall show me off to them as we join together as one! Those gazes of jealousy, defeat, and envy shall make me all the more beautiful!"

As she spoke, Fujiko's body shook with great emotion.

"You are quite the evil woman. You must work to achieve that dream," said Peterhausen with a powerful nod.

"I will! I must give my all for Akuto-sama and work to join all the black magicians under my rule!"

Fujiko clenched her fist while sipping on black tea.

Fujiko had been forced to be Peterhausen's conversational partner this entire time, but her fear had waned after spending several hours with him. Once the fear was gone, she returned to her normal self whose excellent speaking skills allowed her to deceive and threaten people. It had not been difficult to get along with Peterhausen. And this was not entirely due to her speaking skills. Fujiko had a terrible personality and Peterhausen liked that about her.

"I need you to work very hard at this. My master cannot lose his ambitions," uttered Peterhausen like an old prime minister complaining about his attempts to bring up a young general.

"I think the real problem is his goodness, not a lack of ambition," replied someone other than Fujiko.

Peterhausen and Fujiko both turned around at the same moment.

A short girl had walked into the underground palace. She wore a stylish hat and an androgynous mischievous face could be seen below it.

She was Lily Shiraishi, the school's student council president.

"Oh, it is the boy from the other day," commented Peterhausen with a snort.

Veins bulged out on Lily's forehead and her expression grew grim, but she managed to avoid growing violent. She showed no sign of hiding her displeasure, but she kept her arms folded as she stood before Peterhausen.

"Don't call me boy. Whether I look it or not, I am a lady. And I have come with something you might want to hear."

"Then out with it."

"Oh, how self-important. Well, whatever. The student council…no, the entire academy has decided how to deal with you all."

Peterhausen looked indifferent, but Fujiko's body stiffened. She knew very well that Peterhausen's presence at the school caused all sorts of problems.

"Who did the academy side with?"

The academy had previously sided with the moderates and given Akuto his freedom as he was not presently a demon king. However, it would not be surprising if Peterhausen's presence would motivate them to now side with the hardliners.

"To sum it up, nothing changes. The academy will protect Sai Akuto as one of its students. Peterhausen is not an illegal presence. Of course, that's probably just because no one bothered to make any laws about it."

Lily's words put Fujiko at ease. Lily was the student council president and she already worked for the government. Fujiko was extremely grateful that this did not need to develop into a confrontation.

"Thank goodness. You were right. I was glad to hear that."

"That's not all. I wouldn't have come all this way to report that the status quo has been maintained. I am fed up with the moderates…that is, the main faction of the government I belong to."

Lily grinned. She had a boyish face, but when she grinned like that, it held enough intensity to send a chill down Fujiko's spine.

"You are fed up with them?"

"It seems those old men are having a L'Isle-Adam try to seduce Sai Akuto."

Lily's comment shocked Fujiko.

"Seduce…Akuto-sama…?"

"That goes against my principles. L'Isle-Adams can't disobey their orders. And on top of that, she will be dismissed if she fails this mission. So how will this turn out for that unsociable girl? There is no man who has not given into a L'Isle Adam's seduction. Plenty of politicians have fallen into scandals over it in the past."

"I-I cannot allow this!"

"I thought not. I don't want to grow up into the kind of adult who can allow this kind of thing to happen. And once I start hating them, it's hard to stop. That is what I thought you might want to hear. I will be personally taking part in this incident."

"What do you mean?" asked Fujiko.

She could sense no intention to help Akuto in Lily's intensity.

"I am saying I will not handle this like the moderates are. Nor am I going to do nothing about the hardliners like Sai Akuto is. I have obtained some information regarding the central group that is trying to start a war. No matter what Akuto may say, I will kill them!"

Lily brought her fists together in front of her chest.

"The central group that is trying to start a war?"

"CIMO 8."

"Is that their name?"

"They are a group of eight agents from the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office. I have information saying they have already begun to take action. They are experts at intelligence gathering and anti-magic combat."

"That…certainly is worth hearing."

It seemed Lily had gone out of her way to tell them this. And on top of that, she had said she would crush this enemy. To Fujiko, it seemed the girl was doing it out of consideration for Akuto regardless of what she might say.

However…

"But I will be your enemy," said Lily.

"Eh?"

"If he becomes a tool used by black magicians or he takes any action that would disturb our society, I will crush him and those working with him regardless of what the moderates say. That is what I mean. You need to be especially careful, Etou Fujiko-kun," said Lily with a cruel expression.

Fujiko put herself on guard, but she knew her power was not enough to handle the student council president. Strategies that left the fighting to Peterhausen raced through her mind.

But Lily's serious expression collapsed soon thereafter.

"It wouldn't be any fun with you. Tell him that I still haven't shown him everything I am capable of."

"…Understood," agreed Fujiko.

With her threats made, Lily left.

Fujiko sank to the floor and Peterhausen laughed.

"Quite the energetic girl."

"I am the type that fights using my intellect," complained Fujiko.

"If you can keep up your strong front, that can be an excellent strength. But be as it may, if you are the type that fights with your intellect, shouldn't you pass this information on to my master?" asked Peterhausen.

Fujiko gasped and pulled out her student handbook that could act as a communications device.

She opened a telepathic conversation with Akuto, but it refused to connect.

"The mana is being blocked?"

Fujiko looked over toward Peterhausen for an explanation.

"That talk of intelligence gathering and anti-magic combat experts bothers me. Mana jamming is one of their basic techniques."

"But if the entire area of the beach field trip was being jammed, it would have caused enough of a commotion for the academy's teachers to have heard about it. Does that mean Akuto-sama alone is in danger?"

Fujiko now tried to open telepathic communications with Keena.

Keena answered after a few rings.

<Oh, it's senpai. Hi!>

"No, not hi! For one thing, you tricked me into looking after Peterhausen! …But I can discuss that with you later! Do you know where Akuto-sama is?"

<Eh? A-chan? Come to think of it, I haven't seen him.>

"Okay, listen carefully…"

Part 3

When Akuto heard the sound from the thicket, he got up from the tree and took a defensive stance.

He needed to be able to react to whatever came out of that thicket.

But…

"A-chan, I finally found you."

It was Keena who walked unsteadily out of the thicket.

"Keena?"

"Senpai contacted me, so I ran after you to pass on the message."

Keena sat flatly on the ground in front of Akuto.

"Sorry. It seems someone was monitoring me, so I tried to pursue them with Korone. But Korone went on ahead…"

"I see. When I went to your room, I saw you entering the woods, so I followed your light," said Keena with a smile.

Akuto started to feel silly for being so nervous.

"So what did senpai want?"

Keena tilted her head.

"Huh? Um… There were a few things…"

Keena looked up as if she were trying to remember something. This seemed too slow even for Keena.

"Are you okay?" asked Akuto as he peered at her face.

Keena's face was red and her breathing was heavy.

"Yeah… I just ran and flew a bit… so I'm out of breath… Oh, right! One thing was some villains called Simon 5's targeting you!" exclaimed Keena while bringing a fist down on her palm.

"That sounds like a mix between a folk duo and a chorus of five brothers…"

"Well, I might have the name wrong, but these villains are targeting you. I hear they're good at killing magicians. It's so scary."

Keena's voice held no tension at all, so Akuto was unsure how to respond. However, it was still dangerous news.

—Is that why the mana devices malfunctioned?

However, he knew asking Keena that would be pointless, so he kept the thought to himself.

"What else?"

"U-um… She said the student council president told her that. Also…what else was it?"

Keena was acting too stupid. And her face was horribly red.

"Ugh, it's just too hot. But don't worry. I brought this with me so we could drink it together."

Keena pulled out a water bottle hanging from her waist. She took the lid and poured a thick white liquid into it.

"What is that?"

"Heh heh heh… This is a new drink I created! I drank some when I got thirsty running here, so I know it's good!"

Keena held the water bottle lid up high.

"Okay, so it's good…but what is it?"

"It's rice juice!" Keena puffed her chest out proudly and drank the contents of the lid in one gulp. "It's so good!"

"…Good? …No, wait."

Akuto had a very bad feeling.

"You drink some too, A-chan! I've been trying to come up with a way to make rice juice for so long and I finally perfected it! So I brought it on this field trip." Keena refilled the lid and held it out toward Akuto. "I dissolved cooked and crushed rice into water and then – this is the important part – I put koji and yogurt in before sealing it in a bottle and letting it sit! After about two days, it smelled really good and the top layer of the juice was delicious! I then made another discovery! If you filter off that top layer and put it in the refrigerator, it turns into a carbonated cider!"

Keena continued on and on with her lecture on how to make the "rice juice".

—Oh… I was right…

Akuto took the lid and sniffed it. It did smell good, but it was a very adult aroma.

"Keena, this has alcohol in it," said Akuto, but Keena was no longer listening.

Her face was red and she was swaying back and forth.

"Eh heh heh heh heh heh… There are so many A-chans…"

—Well, she did drink a whole bunch after running.

"C'mon, don't drink any more. Come here and take a rest."

Akuto had Keena sit next to the tree he had been leaning up against before. He grabbed her shoulders to adjust her position, but Keena suddenly pulled him toward her while he was crouched down.

"Wah!"

"Eh heh heh heh… A-chan, this feels good…"

Keena was rubbing her cheek up against him. His crouching posture was uncomfortable, so he ended up sitting next to her. Keena embraced Akuto's head and brought her entire body into his arms.

"Onyo nyo nyo nyo nyo…"

Keena began making an odd slurring noise while softly biting at Akuto's ear.

"H-hey! That tickles…"

"Eh? What's wrong with it? Doing this feels somehow nostalgic…"

—Nostalgic? Come to think of it, I did think I might have met her a long time ago.

Akuto thought back to his past. When he was leaving the orphanage, a girl just arriving had cried so much he had bought her the kind of hair decoration adults wore using the money he had been given. The bird design had been identical to the one Keena wore in her hair now, but Keena did not seem to remember it.

"Maybe we really did meet a long time ago," he said.

"Maybe so. Maybe we were destined to meet. Eh heh heh heh heh…"

Keena gave a sloppy smile, but this answer was not the serious one Akuto had been hoping for.

—But I have no real reason to be so fixated over this. Why am I so fixated over it?

With that thought, Akuto suddenly remembered what Junko had said earlier that day.

"You refer to Keena by her given name. I am also your friend, so why do you refer to me by my family name?"

He had thought it was due to how properly Junko acted, but on second thought, Junko was not that difficult to speak with. It may have been that Keena was simply that much easier to relax around.

—In that case… Did I fall for Keena long, long ago?

Once his thoughts turned in that direction, he could not remain calm.

Keena's body was giving off the scent of a slightly burnt confectionery thanks to the "rice juice". That defenseless body leaning up against him was warm and soft like a freshly pounded rice cake.

—To use that comparison, I must have been infected by Keena's rice obsession.

Akuto shook his head in an attempt to calm down. He looked over at Keena's calm face. He thought she must have fallen asleep, but she opened her eyes wide and looked back at him.

—Wah!

He silently shouted out in surprise, but somehow managed to not avert his gaze. He felt averting his gaze would be rude to Keena.

She smiled gently and Akuto felt as if all of his worries from the day were melting away. As he peered into her eyes, he felt as if he was being unsteadily drawn in toward them.

"A-chan, you're trying to kiss me. You can't do that," said Keena suddenly.

Akuto panicked because it felt like she had seen right through to his heart.

"D-don't be ridiculous."

"Hm, that's right. You mustn't do indecent things. But on the cheek is fine," said Keena as she held out her reddened cheek.

—That's right. That wouldn't violate my doctrines… No, wait. I can't do that. But…

Akuto felt his heart relaxing more than he felt any kind of sexual desire. This felt like the family he had always desired. Only in Keena did he feel this familial love that he had always desired yet rejected.

—If it's just showing a familial sort of love, there shouldn't be a problem.

Akuto brought his face toward Keena.

"Yay!" shouted Keena happily as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

And Akuto gave Keena's cheek…

"Take this!"

A tremendous impact slammed into Akuto. He collapsed to the ground head first.

"Hey!" He got up and turned around to find Korone standing next to Keena. "Y-you don't have to suddenly hit me."

But Akuto's complaint was met only with Korone's usual expressionless look.

"You just happened to be in the way while I was taking evasive actions."

"You clearly said 'take this'!"

Korone ignored that point.

"As I said, I was taking evasive actions. We do not have time for an argument."

"What are you talking about?"

Akuto took a step forward to see if she was telling the truth.

And then he was afflicted by a sharp headache.

And an instant after that feeling filled him with confusion…

He heard a loud, dry sound.

At almost the exact same moment, Korone's body slowly began to collapse.

"Korone!"

Akuto tried to run over to her, but she held up a hand to stop him while on her knees.

"Please stay back. I am fine. I was only shot."

—Shot?

Part 4

He suddenly realized he recognized the sound from before. It was the sound of an incantation gun being fired.

"Is it the person we were pursing?" asked Akuto.

Korone nodded.

She was made to be sturdy, so no outward change could be seen. However, Akuto had no way of knowing how much internal damage had been done.

He crouched down, held his breath, and searched for a nearby presence, but he could not detect anyone hiding in the darkness.

"I have an idea who the enemy is," said Korone.

"Who is it?" asked Akuto, but Korone shook her head.

"I cannot say."

"Why not?"

"I cannot tell you that either. However, there is something this situation forces me to ask."

"Eh?" said Akuto in confusion.

Korone stared at him with a serious look in her eyes and said, "What are your feelings for Keena-san?"

This was a sudden question, but Akuto realized Korone's eyes contained a look different from normal. It felt like some emotion was showing through her normal expressionlessness.

"Wh-why are you asking that now?"

"It is important. It determines whether I can fight this enemy for you or not."

"What do you mean?"

"I need not explain any more," said Korone in a serious tone.

—Could it be…?

No matter how obtuse Akuto could be, he was beginning to realize what was causing Korone's odd behavior. It was possible his exchange with Keena while she was drunk had finally led him to think about the existence of "love".

—Could it be that Korone loves me and is trying to oppose the government for that reason? And is she determining my feelings now? But wait. What am I supposed to do in that case? I need Korone with me, but that sort of relationship is out of the question.

"H-hey… Are you mad that Keena was…clinging to me a bit there?" asked Akuto, hoping Keena's intoxication would make a decent excuse.

"I am not angry. However, this is inconvenient for me," replied Korone.

—Come to think of it, Korone has started referring to herself differently.[1] I don't think L'Isle-Adams refer to themselves like that often, but maybe they do once their sense of self begins to form. That must be it. But then…

"Um, sorry, but I don't think things will ever be 'convenient' for you in that way." Akuto was flustered, but he felt the need to state his position clearly. "But that is not because I dislike you or do not need you. I do need you and will continue to need you. I just think what you want would be insincere."

After Akuto finished speaking, Korone stood perfectly still.

"I am sad to hear that."

Korone hung her head down. Her expression was clearly one of sorrow.

Akuto felt a tightness in his chest. He had never felt this feeling before.

Korone spoke in a low, pained voice that sounded like she had to squeeze it out.

"I have determined that I have failed. That means I may no longer be able to remain here."

"Wait, what do you mean?"

"I cannot say. However, this may be the last time we see each other. In case it is, I must say farewell."

"Wait a second!"

Akuto had a very bad feeling, so he reached out toward Korone.

However, she only shook her head.

"I will do my very best, but you should not get your hopes up. Thank you for everything. Farewell."

Korone pulled a doorknob-like object out of her bag and held it out. A hole opened in space as if the air had been split open to produce a door. Korone began to climb into it. This was a portable transport magic circle.

"Please wait. How can you leave without explaining anything? I need you…"

Half of Korone's body had now entered this strange space. She turned around, gave a sorrowful smile and waved at Akuto.

"Farewell."

She then disappeared into the door as if shaking free of something.

The door disappeared into thin air, leaving behind nothing but the dark forest. However, Akuto felt as if a tear shed by Korone had been left behind.

Nevertheless, he did not have time to stand around. He heard a rustling sound form a fairly distant thicket.

—Is that the person who shot Korone!?

Akuto looked toward that thicket. It was moving as if someone was trying to flee. They must have been able to shoot Korone, but had been unable to find a way of escaping unnoticed.

—I might be able to stop them from escaping!

Akuto's history with magic contained failure after failure, but he had no choice but to use it here. He focused and reached out his hand to telekinetically stop everything in that thicket.

However, he had forgotten about the mana abnormality and the headache he had felt just before Korone was shot. He should have been able to guess that someone was preventing magic from being used properly in the area, but he was not thinking rationally.

—Oh, no!

Akuto quickly realized he could not control the power surging in his hand, but it was already too late. An unexpected explosion assaulted the thicket and shook the area around it. A great flash of light lit up the darkness. It had to have been visible from a great distance.

"Kyaaah!"

A voice rang out from the thicket. To Akuto's surprise it sounded like a child.

"Eh?"

He frantically ran over to the thicket and shined his light in.

He found a girl of about ten.

"A-are you okay?"

Akuto helped the girl up. Fortunately, she was not injured. She was breathing and had only been knocked unconscious. Akuto had tried to lower the output of his magic as soon as he realized he had failed, and that seemed to have paid off. The girl was also lucky she had not been directly struck by the explosion. However, the roar of the blast had been enough of an impact to knock her out.

Akuto picked up the girl and checked her face.

—Ah…

He recognized her features. They were almost identical to Hiroshi's. Hiroshi's features were childish to begin with, so there was no mistaking it.

—But this girl can't have been the one to shoot that incantation gun.

Akuto remained on his guard, but he could sense no presence in the surrounding area. The headache had also gone.

"Keena, are you okay?" asked Akuto as he turned around.

"Yeah. But A-chan…" said Keena uncertainly as she stood up. "Korone-chan left, didn't she?"

"You heard that?"

"I fell asleep, so I only heard the last bit. A-and I-I'm sorry. I just remembered what senpai told me," said Keena apologetically now that she had sobered up a good bit.

"What did you remember?"

"Korone-chan was, um…ordered to seduce you. If she failed, she was going to be fired as your observer…"

—What!?

Akuto was at a loss for words.

He was fed up with people trying to influence him by seducing him, but he was also filled with disgust at Korone's superiors for making her feel so sad by doing this to her. He also felt regret over the fact that he might have been able to do something had he known about it ahead of time. However, those various emotions soon disappeared, leaving behind only a desire to apologize to Korone. He wondered if there had been anything more he could have done.

But it seemed he would not be given time to lighten his heavy heart. He heard voices as people approached after hearing the explosion.

"Heeey!"

"Yukiko! Yukiko!"

The girl in Akuto's arms reacted to those voices. He waited for her to wake up and then placed her down on her own two feet.

"Are you okay? Sorry about scaring you. It seems some people have come for you."

The girl named Yukiko looked up at him with a blank look.

"Are you the demon king?"

That question shocked Akuto, but he had to give a mature answer when speaking to a child.

"Um…no. But…Some people do call me that."

Yukiko looked up at him with a look of wonder.

But then the voices of the approaching villagers grew tenser.

"Yukiko! That's dangerous!"

"Get away from him!"

However, the villagers did not come any closer. They kept their distance with looks of fear on their faces.

That alone would not have been too bad, but when Yukiko did not immediately leave Akuto's side, they began picking up stones and throwing them at him.

"Wah…"

Akuto wanted to avoid the stones, but he realized doing so would let one of them strike Yukiko. He gave up on dodging and instead knocked them down with his hands. He slapped the fist-sized stones aside. He had strengthened his physical body with mana, so this was a simple feat. However, he had forgotten to take into account what normal people would think when they saw how simply he managed it.

"H-he's a monster!"

"Run, Yukiko!"

—Oh, crap.

The rain of stones grew more intense. He was forced to lean over Yukiko to protect her, but that only provoked the villagers further.

"H-he's trying to abduct her!"

—No, I'm not…

He complained silently, but he doubted the villagers would be willing to listen. Instead, he decided to persuade Yukiko.

"If you do not go back to them, they probably will not stop throwing stones," he said, but Yukiko still looked like she wanted to say something. So he asked, "What is it?"

She replied, "Are you my brother's friend?"

He had realized she was Hiroshi's little sister, so he was able to answer that question honestly.

"You are Miwa Hiroshi-kun's little sister, right? In that case, I am."

"Then…" Yukiko grabbed his hand and squeezed. "Please tell me the truth! Is my brother the hero?"

Akuto did not understand what exactly she meant by that question or why she asked it with such desperation.

"No, he is not. Nor does he want to be."

He readily answered, but Yukiko suddenly kicked him in the shin.

"Ah…"

The kick did not hurt, but it still elicited a voice of surprise. Yukiko used the opportunity to slip from Akuto's hands and run away. She was crying.

"Yukiko got away!"

"This way! Hurry! Run!"

Akuto could hear those voices in the distance.

"Honestly…"

Akuto had no choice but to run away as well. He quickly left after meeting up with Keena who was hiding behind a tree.

"A-chan, are you okay?"

"Yes…but there are just too many things about this that bother me. Not to mention Korone… What am I supposed to do?"

Chapter 4: The Legendary Hero Arrives!

Part 1

With Korone, the person they had been pursuing, Hiroshi, and everything else, Akuto did not get much sleep. He was a natural worrier, so he could only lie blankly in his room in the lodging facility. If Korone had been with him, she would have teased him regardless of what happened. Akuto realized that she had helped him out a lot with his past worries, but it now only made him all the more aware of her absence.

This vicious cycle wore him out and he began dozing off as dawn approached, but he was suddenly awoken by Junko early in the morning.

"You fool! What have you done!? Look out to the front of the lodging facility! The villagers are calling for you!"

Akuto jumped out of bed when he heard that.

Junko seemed to have come as is after waking up because she was wearing a T-shirt and track pants. The look on her face told him the situation had begun to develop in an odd direction.

Akuto immediately recalled what had happened the day before. The villagers were likely angry about what had happened with Yukiko.

"What a pain… But I suppose I was in the wrong."

"You idiot! What did you do!?"

"It wasn't my fault…but I think they've made a misunderstanding."

He looked at the clock. It was 5 in the morning. He walked out into the passageway to find Mitsuko-sensei and Hiroshi.

"What's this? Some kind of riot? Maybe a big riot on a small island would be fun. …Or maybe not."

Either because she had just woken up or because of her natural lack of morals, Mitsuko-sensei seemed quite excited. Meanwhile, Hiroshi's expression was stiff and he was doing his best not to look Akuto in the eye.

—This isn't good…

Akuto was feeling a bit depressed, but he was never lacking when it came to a sense responsibility or justice. He truly felt sorry for what he had done and decided to go apologize.

"I will explain the situation to the villagers. They should understand then. I cannot allow them to cause a commotion."

"I think this is enough of a commotion already," joked Mitsuko-sensei.

Hiroshi's expression grew even darker, but he spoke to Akuto as he tried to move past Hiroshi.

"Aniki, I'm sorry the people of my hometown are doing this…"

"Don't worry about it. After what I did, it isn't surprising they're mistaken about what happened. But I'm sure they'll understand once I speak with them."

Akuto walked toward the front door. However, he realized just how abnormal the situation was when he caught a glimpse outside the hallway window.

Approximately twenty villager men stood around the entrance. They were all middle-aged to elderly. Every single one of them held either a shotgun or large knife. They all had bloodshot eyes and abnormal expressions. However, Akuto could tell these expressions were based in fear, not a desire to fight.

—They're scared… But that's all the more reason I need to solve this misunderstanding.

Akuto gulped.

He had to prepare himself. These people were so scared no one could say what they would do. If he only had to worry about himself, he would not be too worried, but he could not let this cause problems for those around him. And even if he could handle physical damage, the mental damage was hard to bear.

He resolved himself and opened the door. He was met with a great muttering and many gazes.

The ring around the entrance spread out.

"I am Sai Akuto, a first year from Constant Magic Academy. You are here about last night, aren't you?" began Akuto.

A man of about 40 who seemed to be their representative stepped forward with a shotgun resting on his shoulder. His hair was close-cropped and he was well built, but there was obvious tension in his step.

"Are you the one who attacked a child from the village?"

"If you are talking about the girl named Yukiko, then I am the one you want. However, I did not actually attack her. I only startled her a bit, thinking she was someone else."

"Thinking she was someone else? You make that sound like nothing. Yukiko was crying and she called you a demon king."

"Only the words of a child," replied Akuto. When the villagers began muttering amongst themselves, he realized that may not have been the best thing to say. "No, I am only saying that no demon king exists. That was just a childish delusion."

Akuto was simply trying to gloss over the issue, but his desire to make himself look good and his clear voice made the others think he was boldly proclaiming it.

Yet the man with the close-cropped hair did not back down.

"W-wait… That makes no sense. You were predicted to become a demon king in the future, weren't you? And those predictions have never been wrong. How is that a delusion?"

"The prediction itself is a delusion. All of you are simply being manipulated. I have heard the prediction concerning this island. That is what you are afraid of, isn't it? But as you can see, I am nothing more than a student. I do not have that much power."

The villagers fell silent at that. When he stated it with such conviction, there was nothing they could say. And it was true that Akuto was nothing more than a boy with a slightly better than average build. This pleased Akuto.

"I of course apologize for what happened. It was indeed me who made Yukiko-chan cry. I am very sorry."

Akuto gave a deep bow.

When he went that far, the tension surrounding the villagers began to lessen. The man with the close-cropped hair must have decided Akuto could actually be spoken with because he asked a question with a somewhat gentle expression.

"Sorry for putting it this way, but a lot of the students at your school are nothing but thugs. There have been a few commotions during past beach field trips. That's why we were already on our guard. And then we were told someone known as a demon king would be coming. But I don't see how someone you can have a normal conversation with could be a demon king. The people of the village will still be concerned though. Now that they think the demonic beast from the prediction is real, that isn't too surprising."

"If they have some form of evidence, I can see why. Did something happen?" asked Akuto to further eliminate the tension.

"Yesterday, people said they heard roars coming from the lake the legend says the demonic beast comes from. There were also reports of extremely isolated earthquakes. And for a while now, people claim to have seen a suspicious man walking around. But it seems that man was not you. When that man passes by, people say they hear a strange noise and get a headache."

That man sounded familiar to Akuto. He decided the misunderstanding would be easier to deal with if he told them the truth.

"If you rationally inspect these incidents, I think you will find they all have different causes. As for the suspicious man, I may have seen him too. I was pursuing someone last night. It was that pursuit that Yukiko-chan was accidentally involved in."

"So that's it."

"I too am worried about this man. I will help in any way I can."

Akuto smiled at the man with the close-cropped hair and the man smiled back.

"I like the sound of help from an excellent student who knows a lot about magic. I hope you can-…"

Just as the man reached out for a handshake, a high-pitched voice cried out from within the group of villagers.

"Liar! He's lying! If there's no demon king, there's no hero either!"

It was Yukiko's voice. She pushed her way past the adults' legs and glared at Akuto.

"Eh?"

Akuto was confused, but the villagers only laughed.

"Ha ha ha ha! Oh, that's right, that's right. If there was a demon king, then there would have to be a hero, wouldn't there!? But that also means no demon king means no hero."

The man with the close-cropped hair rubbed Yukiko's head as he said that. Yukiko listened with a frustrated expression. She looked as if she could start crying at any moment.

Akuto was visibly puzzled, so the villagers explained.

"Her family seems to think that her older brother is the predicted hero."

"But none of us believe it. Sorry, but he just isn't the type."

"He's just so weak."

"Yeah, he's no hero. He's been a complete coward since he was little."

"And he isn't all that bright either."

The villagers roared with laughter.

Yukiko began to cry. While sobbing, she raised a small voice of protest.

"Why do you all make fun of him…? He got into the magic academy, so he's amazing… And once he makes something of himself, you'll all gladly rely on him…"

She spoke so quietly that the villagers could not hear. However, Akuto heard her. It was possible his hearing had gotten better.

At any rate, Akuto grasped the complex situation.

"It isn't right to laugh at people," said Akuto.

He had meant it as a quiet voice, but all of the villagers turned toward him at once.

"Ah? Oh…did we make this uncomfortable for you?"

"Well, yes. You are laughing at someone who has left the island to do his very best."

Akuto's voice grew louder and deeper.

The villagers moved away from Akuto. This was not simply due to fear. The pressure around him had literally increased. Mana light burst out at his feet and instantaneously spread out in a ring. Power was leaking out because he was so worked up that he could not control it.

"W-wait… This was just a joke. Everyone talks about people behind their back like this. It's a sign of affection…"

The villagers were obviously flustered.

"That is not what I am taking issue with. You talk about someone being weak while you yourselves are the weakest of all. You believe in the legend. However, you refuse to believe in the hero who says he will leave your village. You only believe in the demon king part of the legend and that makes you worried. If that is not weakness, then what is it!? You involve politics in your everyday lives. You always act as a group. You attack the timid first and try to curry favor with anyone who looks powerful. That is what I am taking issue with!" Akuto's voice had raised to a shout at some point. And he was the type who could not stop himself once he got going. "This village will obviously be destroyed without anyone having to attack it! It pisses me off that you bring weapons to confront a student yet you don't even realize how laughable your cowardice is!"

Akuto grabbed the barrel of a nearby shotgun and pushed it out of the way, but the frightened man holding it reflexively pulled the trigger.

A blast rang out. The barrel had been pointed at Akuto's gut. If a human body received that shot at close range, it would be left with a giant hole. However, this was Akuto. He shook slightly but was otherwise fine. Small pieces of lead fell to the ground from below where his shirt had been burned and torn.

"W-wah! He's a monster!" shouted the villagers.

On top of that, the roar of a beast could be heard in the distance. This roar reminded Akuto of the demonic beast in the lake the villagers had mentioned. He did not know if the roar was actually produced by a demonic beast, but everyone there clearly heard it.

—Not good. I don't know what that sound is, but this was the worst possible timing. This really makes it look like I'm a demon king!

Akuto finally calmed down. The villagers were frozen in place as they surrounded him. They clearly feared opposing him because they were trying to be as unassuming as possible in how they held their guns and knives. That was a bad omen. Even if they all charged at him at once, Akuto was confident he could neutralize them. However, he would have a hard time dealing with the situation if they all ran off at once.

—I really need stop taking things past the point of no return… Ahh, if only Korone was here. She could probably settle this for me.

That hopeless wish floated up in the back of his mind, but then help came from an unexpected place.

"P-please don't…do anything to them," said a voice behind Akuto.

Hiroshi walked out of the lodging facility entrance.

—Thank goodness. If Hiroshi stands up for them here and I give in, everything will be resolved.

Akuto breathed an internal sigh of relief.

Yukiko ran over to Hiroshi.

"Onii-chan! Help! You're strong, right? You aren't actually that demon king's friend, right? You were only pretending so you could defeat him here on the island, right?" asked Yukiko while in tears.

The villagers looked toward Hiroshi as if to say "It couldn't be…" or "Wait, really?"

Hiroshi was obviously unsure how to reply. His lack of confidence led him to fear the eyes of the villagers. For that reason, he could neither affirm nor deny what Yukiko had said. And yet clearly stating one or the other would prevent future sorrow for Yukiko.

—It's because he acts like this!

Akuto could have given up here, but Hiroshi's attitude irritated him. The power still leaking from him began to whirl violently around him. This was the boy who had fought a 15 meter dragon barehanded. Only a very powerful person could approach him when he was pissed.

And of course, Hiroshi was frightened. But this only further rubbed Akuto the wrong way.

He took a step toward Hiroshi. He was planning to speak his mind about how the other boy was acting. However, no one watching on thought he was simply going to speak his mind. It looked more like he was going to incinerate both Hiroshi and Yukiko until not even their bones remained.

"W-waaah!"

Hiroshi had either grown truly desperate or was simply trying to push Akuto away because he jabbed his right hand forward while holding Yukiko in his left arm. The hand struck Akuto in the chest.

It made a ridiculously soft sound, but that sound brought Akuto back to his senses.

—Oh, um… I've done it again. What do I do now? Oh, I know. I just have to lose the fight here!

Akuto thought this was an excellent idea.

"Y-you beat me," said Akuto as he limply collapsed backwards. He closed his eyes and lay on the ground.

—That went well.

Akuto was the only one who thought the silence meant he had succeeded.

Then again, he had succeeded to defuse the situation. Just not in the way he had intended.

"Wh-what was that?"

"What a strange person."

The villagers began to leave.

"I know what happened. The Miwa boy must have paid someone with powerful magic."

"Oh, so the attack on his sister was an act, too?"

"I bet all of this was."

They were all saying things like that.

—H-huh? Wait. This isn't good. I get the feeling I did something inexcusable to Hiroshi.

Akuto opened his eyes.

He first saw Yukiko running off in tears.

Hiroshi looked over at Akuto who was still collapsed on the ground. Akuto received a direct look at the tears in Hiroshi's eyes. He saw an unexplainable expression on his face. Akuto had never before seen the look in his eyes. It was a look he wanted to forget as soon as possible but that he doubted he could ever forget. Every time he recalled it, he was filled with regret.

However, Akuto and Hiroshi's gazes only met for an instant. Despite being out in the open, Hiroshi shed tears as he ran away after Yukiko.

—Crap…

Akuto had felt regret a few times already on this beach field trip, but this was by far the worst.

"You fool! You have done something truly horrible!"

Junko slapped Akuto. He had been punched and kicked before, but this was the first time he had received a slap filled with such emotion.

"I…regret what I did."

Akuto's head hung down. Junko raised the corners of her eyes and placed her hands on her hips.

"If you can regret it now, why did you let your feelings explode back then? They may have made a misunderstanding, but those villagers meant no harm. There is nothing wrong with protesting on the behalf of one of their children. The problem here is that you so thoroughly insist on doing the right thing that you cannot forgive the weak!"

"I know that… I know that now. I didn't before though. It's hard to explain…" said Akuto as he kept his gaze on the ground.

The villagers had left after finding it all to be laughable. Keena had pursued Hiroshi and Akuto trusted she would bring him back. Akuto was in his room at the lodging facility being lectured by Junko.

"You mean you do not understand how the weak feel, don't you? I suppose you wouldn't!"

"No…I understand…or I try to. I grew up poor in an orphanage and have been surrounded by plenty of misfortune."

Akuto seemed truly depressed, so Junko found it hard to say any more. She placed a hand on her head, looked away from him, and began speaking as if it was not her problem.

"According to my father, those undergoing training become unable to forgive the weak. And you never had a tolerant personality to begin with."

"I'm intolerant?" asked Akuto in a serious tone of voice.

Junko gave a bitter smile and replied, "You always insist that people must do the right thing. How is that tolerant?"

"Oh… I see."

Akuto brought a hand to his chin as if he had never realized that before.

Junko could not help but laugh.

"You idiot. Why are you listening to my lecture so diligently? This is not like you."

"Don't laugh. I think this is one of the areas where we are similar," said Akuto.

This must have surprised Junko because her face reddened and she stopped moving. She then began speaking quietly while almost mumbling.

"Stop that. This is why I cannot just leave you be."

Hearing that, Akuto nodded and said, "And I am always thankful for it."

Junko completely froze in place now.

"I am t-trying to lecture you."

"And that is what I am thankful for."

"But then it does not feel like I am lecturing you. Couldn't you at least cry a little?"

Junko intentionally raised her voice a bit.

"I am diligently listening. I thought that was best."

"No, I think that is the problem. If you would be a little more defiant this would feel more worthwhile."

"I can't be defiant just because you tell me to."

"I suppose not… I am done here. Just remember that you need to be more tolerant. You also need to apologize to Hiroshi later." Junko cleared her throat and changed the subject. "By the way, I noticed Korone was not with you. If she had been there, this could have been dealt with more easily."

Akuto's expression grew grim. He then explained the situation to Junko.

"Seducing you? Dismissed? I see… I had thought she was acting oddly."

Junko blushed when she recalled what had happened.

"A-anyway, I cannot forgive whoever did something so cruel. You should make an official objection to have her brought back."

Akuto nodded, but then spoke.

"The seduction is one thing, but if her dismissal was decided politically, we have no choice but to go along with it. What am I supposed to do?"

Junko sighed and said, "Remember what you said about making sure everything went well?"

Akuto's expression once more said he had only just realized this.

"Oh, you're right. I did decide that, didn't I? But this will make it look like I want to oppose the government. Can I never escape that?"

Akuto looked troubled, so Junko spoke lightly.

"When you possess great power, you take on responsibility to match. If you do not want to become a demon king, you need to keep up with your studies and become a central member of the government. But for now, just go apologize to Hiroshi."

Junko then waved her hand as she left the room.

Meanwhile, Keena caught up with Hiroshi. He had not wanted to return to the village or the school lodging facility, so he had been forced to wander

around the woods in the area. It was not surprising that he had been found so quickly.

"Hey, A-chan didn't mean any harm."

Keena walked behind Hiroshi whose head was drooping down.

"I already know that. And that's what makes this so hard," said Hiroshi sadly before sinking to the ground as if he was sick of walking. "I know it's my fault for being weak. What aniki said was right and I understand why everyone laughs at me."

"But Hiroshi-kun, you're better at magic than me and you have more friends than me."

Keena crouched down in front of Hiroshi.

"That's not the issue. What I don't like are the expectations placed on me. I'm not strong enough to live up to those expectations."

"Expectations?"

"The village's expectations for me are just too heavy. And…this may be an odd thing to say, but I hate justice," said Hiroshi as he raised his head.

"Justice?"

Keena tilted her head in confusion.

"Or rather, I hate people who force their ideas of justice on others. Most of the people in the village are like that. It's a small village, so they decide these strange rules that protect the village are what justice is. But those rules also cause a lot of friction in a small village like this."

"Oh, I think I know what you mean."

"That was why I wanted to become one of the people who makes those rules if I got stronger. …But I guess thinking about that is pointless when I'm this weak."

Hiroshi gave a feeble smile.

"No. I think you're plenty strong, Hiroshi-kun. But you're kind, so you're afraid of getting too strong and hurting others."

Keena smiled.

Hiroshi looked away in embarrassment.

"S-stop that. That isn't true."

"But it was because you're strong and kind that you fought for A-chan, right? You even got hurt."

"I only got hurt because I'm weak."

"No. Wasn't that because you didn't want to hurt your opponent?"

"You're overestimating me…"

"Eh? But you're a hero, aren't you?"

"I'm no hero. In fact, it's because I don't want to be one that-…" Hiroshi trailed off when he saw that Keena obviously wanted to say something. He then stood up as if he had just realized something. "Okay, I'll prove to you how ridiculous that legend is. Come with me. I'll take you to the location from the legend."

Hiroshi then began walking.

Part 2

Meanwhile back at the academy, Fujiko was awakened by a call from Junko. It was still seven in the morning.

<Senpai, there is something I would like for you to look into.>

Junko wanted her to look into Korone's dismissal. Fujiko was in a bad mood after being woken up and she had almost no connection to Korone, so she had no reason to accept.

"I do not think so. Why would I do anything for that intrusion of a L'Isle-Adam?"

As soon as she complained, the person on the other end of the telepathic communication changed. This was Junko's strategy.

<Senpai, I urge you to do this.>

"Akuto-sama!" Fujiko's attitude completely changed. "Yes! Right away! I will get to the bottom of this!"

Fujiko then headed to the underground palace.

"…and that is what happened."

She informed Peterhausen about what Akuto had told her. Her own network could not tell her what was happening in the center of the government, so it would be faster to ask that dragon that possessed functions equivalent to a god. Peterhausen knew a lot about the world, but he could not provide an answer about anything besides a direct question because the amount of data was so great. Fujiko did not know if that was a problem of ability or personality, but she had grasped that characteristic while speaking with him.

"I cannot obtain logs on those in the center of the government."

What he referred to as a log was the record of a human's actions that was transmitted to their god via the mana in their brain. Those records allowed the gods to evaluate people's actions. Peterhausen was the god of the black magicians who opposed that system. He held the capacity to take logs from any human.

"I thought you could access logs from anyone."

"If I was currently able to do that, the government would have been long since overthrown. Followers must register with their god. That is known as a baptism. While a baptism is not needed to offer one's log up to me, it is necessary that the person acknowledges me and is willing to provide me with that log."

"So that is it…"

"Even so, rumors of my presence have spread. The logs are beginning to gather bit by bit. However, I have nothing from anyone who knows about Korone. In fact, even if I did know, I could not tell you."

"Why not?" asked Fujiko.

Peterhausen grinned.

"I have the same duty as a god. To preserve people's human rights, I am forbidden from telling anyone the contents of others' logs."

"That is surprising."

"Black magicians insist on equality. They do not spy on or use these logs as the government does. You too are a black magician, aren't you?"

"Two of my favorite terms are 'underhanded' and 'emergency measures'."

"What a troublesome girl… At any rate, was that your only question?"

"Yes. If you cannot help with Korone, I will investigate using my own network. On a more personal level, I suppose I would like to know more about Akuto-sama. With his power, I would think he could take control of that entire village."

"Something along those same lines is concerning me."

"Eh?" Fujiko was confused by Peterhausen's strange attitude. "There is something that concerns you?"

Peterhausen nodded.

"When I choose a master, I am giving that master the right to control me. I cannot act autonomously, but my current master does not intend to fully control me. That has left me incomplete."

—Does that mean…!?

That explanation led a lot of things to click into place in Fujiko's mind.

"So Akuto-sama will become a demon king when the desire to become one settles in his mind?" muttered Fujiko.

Peterhausen confirmed it.

"My master must make the decision to destroy the current system and construct a new order. That is the moment I am waiting for."

—That will be the moment when the demon king is born!

Fujiko's body trembled in surprise. Akuto was not yet a demon king, but the key to becoming one was contained within his will.

"That makes me want to seduce him or use any other means necessary." Fujiko licked her lips. "I too desire to start a revolution. This gives me all the more reason to bring Akuto-sama's heart to me."

"How reliable. I too am waiting for that moment. If he remains as he is, it will lead to problems."

"Problems?"

"Yes…"

"Is this the lake?"

Keena let out a cry of joy in front of a lovely lake.

The lake was a pure blue. It was surrounded by white sand and was large enough that one had to move their head side to side in order to see the entire thing. The ring of white and blue within the green of the mountain was beautiful.

"Yes. This is the legendary lake."

"It's so pretty. I can see why people would make a weird legend about it!" said Keena excitedly.

But Hiroshi shook his head.

"No. This lake is in the very center of the island, so don't you find it odd that it has a white beach around it and that the water is so blue?"

"Is that odd? I don't really know."

"Then I will keep this simple: this is the ocean. There is a cave underground that connects it to the ocean."

"Oh, I see," said Keena.

Just then, a great roar came from the mountain next to the lake.

"Kyah!"

Keena covered her ears and curled up on the ground, but Hiroshi only explained calmly.

"The underground cave has a large empty space and a hole that leads to the mountain. That allows air to get in. About once a year, something about the morning and evening or the condition of the waves causes that noise. It is especially loud this year. That is why everyone believes in the demonic beast."

"Eh? Really?"

Keena looked up at Hiroshi.

"Yes. I am actually not that good at swimming…but I guess you already heard about that. Anyway, I was secretly practicing with my little sister in this lake because everyone stays away thanks to the legend. I ended up sinking and would have drowned had I not found the cave down below. That was when I realized the secret of the noise. I could hear it roaring while I was inside. Ha ha ha," laughed Hiroshi. "And as I said before, this island is only 100 years old. He's dead now, but my grandfather was the first settler here. That's why I know one other secret the others don't."

"A secret?" asked Keena.

Hiroshi pointed toward a narrow path leading around the lake.

"That path leads to the mountain end of the cave. There is a shrine inside and the proof of the hero has been left there."

"Eh? The proof of the hero?"

"Ridiculous, right? Especially since that shrine has my grandfather's name on it. By the way, the proof of the hero is a small sword stuck in a stone. Supposedly, only the hero can pull it out. I jokingly tried to pull it out once but couldn't. When I told my father, he was angry but in an odd way. He told me to study. That was how I ended up coming to the academy. But that also taught me that it is all just a farce. It's just a legend my family made up. Isn't it ridiculous?" Hiroshi smiled, but his voice was growing more and more tearful. "That's why it's so…painful to be called a hero… It's all an act put on by my family. Also, I was late to the aptitude test when entering the academy, so I took it after everyone else was gone. Do you know what I got?"

"What's wrong, Hiroshi-kun? And no, I don't know."

"My result was 'hero'. But the teacher kept it a secret. I think that was because she didn't believe it…unlike aniki and his 'demon king' result. Does that make any sense?"

As Hiroshi's voice sank, Keena saw a pathetic expression on his face.

But she looked him straight in the eye.

"It makes perfect sense."

"Eh?"

"After all, you believed that A-chan was a demon king. That was because you wanted to believe that you're a hero, right?"

Hiroshi did not know what to say in response.

"N-no…I did that because…"

He tried to deny it, but he could not find a way to do so.

He had always yearned for strength. Whether it was for good or evil, he had yearned for strength. And so he had taken a liking to Akuto's confidence. He had felt as if he would grow stronger if he stayed with Akuto. But whenever the situation threatened to remind him of his weakness, he would always run away.

Hiroshi was at a loss for words when he realized that. And Keena smiled at him.

"Hey, let's go see that shrine."

"Eh? But it's only-…"

"I don't mind. C'mon, let's go."

Keena pulled on Hiroshi's hand as he hesitated. She then ran down the small path Hiroshi had pointed out.

After heading down that deserted path for a while, they came to a fairly open area. The surface entrance to the shrine's cave was likely there.

But Hiroshi and Keena stopped in their tracks when they noticed someone standing there.

"Huh?"

Both of them grew suspicious. The person was so suspicious that they instinctually lowered their voices.

The man was looking out across the lake. He had his back to them, but they could still tell just how bizarre a person he was. He was wearing a long white coat even in the summer. Even over his coat, they could tell he had a tall, tough body.

"Wh-who is that?"

"Hmm, he looks like a very strange person," said Keena despite being very strange herself.

"There's no one like that in the village."

"I suppose there wouldn't be…"

Hiroshi and Keena hid in a thicket on the side of the path.

Suddenly, the man opened the front of his coat.

"Wait, is that-…"

"That's exactly what a pervert does…"

The man then yelled loudly toward the lake.

"Lake! Hear my shout!"

The man then began shouting just as he had proclaimed. He was not simply speaking loudly. It was a shout. It was a cry with no meaning. And he was performing perfect diaphragmatic breathing. To put it bluntly, it was quite annoying.

"Nishugyuouuuwashaaagyoiimouudiemaotoouuuukorponooojibotsugamomorueodotsurirofuueemadoiimodooomedoooohhh!"

They were quite a ways from the village and there was no fear of the villagers approaching the lake right now. Whether he was taking that into account or not, the man cried out as loudly as he could.

After finally finishing, Hiroshi and Keena exchanged a glance.

"Wh-what was that?"

"H-he really is a dangerous person…"

Now that he was done shouting, the man said something surprising.

"Now then, my voice is in top form today. That is enough warming up for now."

The man then shook his opened coat.

The coat began emitting noise. The inside of the coat seemed to have speakers installed. And loud ones at that.

Hiroshi and Keena instinctually covered their ears. The sound produced was even more unpleasant and even more meaningless than the man's shouting.

The great din of noise coming from the speakers was a mixture of metal scraping together, explosions, electronic noises, and the static of a radio being tuned randomly.

And on top of it all, the man began shouting once more.

"Mhaouuuwakootottooojopooosareeedafwoonaaooeah!"

As he shouted, he bent over backwards, collapsed to the ground, and began writhing around. It looked like he was being shocked by electricity. Or perhaps like he these were his death throes.

Hiroshi and Keena were at a loss for words.

However, what happened next left them at even more of a loss for words.

The man finally ended the noise and shouting. He stood up while gasping for breath as if he had used up all his strength.

"The real fun is about to begin."

That was enough to almost make Hiroshi and Keena fall over in shock, but what the man said next were even more shocking for a different reason.

"I have obtained the noise pattern of the demon king. Now, listen, you pathetic demonic beast!"

"Problems will arise if he tries to use me before he has fully awakened as a demon king," explained Peterhausen.

"What do you mean?" asked Fujiko.

"I was created in order to provide magic for all of humanity. However, that resulted in me affecting other life forms as well. And that has caused serious bugs in some life forms."

Fujiko was able to guess what he was talking about.

"You don't mean…"

She gasped and Peterhausen nodded.

"The mana inside the life form's body goes berserk and their form and nature change. That is what we call a demonic beast. A fully awakened demon king can control me, but otherwise demonic beasts will appear in various places. It could also resurrect demonic beasts that were sealed in the past." Peterhausen continued. "Demonic beasts are activated by the wavelength of the mana inside the demon king's body. As such, demonic beasts will listen to the demon king's orders. That should hold true for my current master as well."

"Come to think of it, I heard that Akuto-sama managed to remove the mana from a demonic beast in the mountain behind the school."

"Demonic beasts can be useful in battle, but while my master is an incomplete demon king, he will only produce pitiable demonic beasts that hold no purpose."

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhh!"

A roar reverberated from the lake. It was clearly the roar of some sort of life form.

"This is…different from normal…"

Even Hiroshi was panicked.

"Different?" asked Keena.

Hiroshi's face paled and he replied, "This isn't the sound I know. Don't tell me this is the real-…"

The center of the lake exploded. A pillar of water shot over ten meters into the air. The roar came from the center of that pillar and the seawater was blasted in every direction.

The torrential spray reached even Hiroshi and Keena.

"Hya ha ha ha ha ha! It has been resurrected!" shouted the perverted-looking man.

The spray had soaked him as well, but he did not seem to care. He spread his arms as if overcome by exhilaration.

The demonic beast that had come from the center of the lake was now visible.

It looked like a giant cylindrical tower. It was so thick not even three people would have been able to reach all the way around it. It was about the height of a five story building. The top had a large opening and whisker-like tentacles were stretching from it. It was a dark reddish-brown with a leopard-like pattern covering it.

"It's a sea cucumber…" muttered Keena.

"The sea cucumbers in the ocean here were the demonic beast? W-we need to get out of here and tell someone…"

Hiroshi was just about to turn tail and flee, when…

"Kyaaah!"

He heard a high-pitched scream.

And Hiroshi knew the voice all too well.

"Yukiko…"

Hiroshi turned around to find Yukiko screaming upon seeing the demonic beast. If that was all there was to it, he could just take her with him when he fled. However, her scream had led the man to notice her.

The perverted man turned around. He had dark skin, his hair was kept short, and he wore sunglasses.

None of that was all that odd, but his expression was far from normal. Even with the sunglasses on, the way he smiled made it look like he was possessed.

"You saw it, didn't you!?" said the perverted man as he slowly approached.

He should hardly have been surprised someone had noticed after summoning the demonic beast so loudly, but it was the perfect perverted comment.

"N-nooo…"

Yukiko's legs froze up and she could not move.

The perverted man spread his arms as he approached her.

"W-wait!" shouted Hiroshi.

The man twisted his head at an odd angle. He looked back and forth between Hiroshi and Yukiko.

"Ahh, looks like I have a big and small version of the same face here. Not that the big one is all that big."

He then began approaching Yukiko with unexpected speed.

"Stop!" yelled Hiroshi.

"Onii-chan!" screamed Yukiko.

The perverted man picked up Yukiko.

"I'll be taking the small one as a hostage. And you, big one, don't try to run away… But that's the normal method for a villain, so it's just boring. Well, I guess I have no choice this time. Still, it isn't art unless it's a strategy no one else could have thought up. Don't you agree?"

The perverted man spoke amiably with Hiroshi.

—Dammit, who is this guy?

Hiroshi's body trembled with both anger and fear, but he had to protect Yukiko at all costs.

"Let go of my sister."

"No, I don't think so. This isn't art either, so it's boring. But she saw this, so I have to eliminate her. And the same goes for you."

The man had clearly used the word "eliminate". Tension ran through Hiroshi's body.

—Where's Keena-chan…!?

He turned around to find only Keena's clothes lying on the ground. It seemed she had succeeded in disappearing. It was possible Keena could help rescue Yukiko.

—If that pervert isn't too skilled with magic, we should be able to manage.

Hiroshi took a fighting stance and slowly moved forward.

The perverted man burst out laughing.

"Are you from the academy? That means you're trying to use magic, right?"

"What's so funny!?"

"The fact that this is reckless. Then again, I need you to take this seriously. Remaining serious while doing something reckless is art. I have to do my best to ensure your efforts are truly reckless."

The man's reasoning was incredibly strange.

"Quit…joking around!"

Hiroshi tried to produce a mana ball in a hand behind his back. He would prepare a means of attack where the man could not see and then fire it when he had a chance.

But…

—What?

Hiroshi was dumbfounded. He could not produce the mana ball.

"Impossible…"

There was no way he could have failed simply from being nervous, and yet he found himself unable to gather mana.

"Ha ha ha ha haaa!" laughed the perverted man suddenly.

Hiroshi's eyes opened in shock as the man pointed behind himself. He pointed toward the lake.

The demonic beast was still in the center of the lake. It looked like a great tower. Its body was pulsating as if it was drawing something into its body.

"…Ahh!"

Hiroshi realized what was happening. Light was gathering near the demonic beast's mouth.

"Don't tell me…it's gathering mana…"

"Yes! This demonic beast absorbs mana! Almost everything in this world requires mana to function. So if this thing shows up…"

The perverted man laughed in pure amusement.

"What are you trying to do with that thing?" asked Hiroshi and the man began laughing even harder.

"Why would I tell you that? But what I will tell you is that I personally want destruction and chaos. This is anarchy! This is art!"

"This guy's insane…" muttered Hiroshi.

The perverted man gave an incredibly menacing look and began yelling.

"Insane? This is the problem with people who don't understand! They don't understand what noise truly is! With destruction, you can't just destroy things! Something cheap can only be destroyed in a cheap way! Chaos brings out the true essence of humanity!"

This only caused Hiroshi's face to pale further, but the man's calm expression returned in the next moment as if the fit of shouting had never happened.

"Well, I suppose normal people will never understand art even if you explain it to them. If you have never created art yourself, you will never understand a discussion of art. Now, enough pointless chatter."

The perverted man began slowly moving toward Hiroshi. When Hiroshi realized what that meant, he felt a chill run down his spine.

—He's really planning to eliminate everyone who saw him…

The man still held Yukiko, but Hiroshi could not use magic to try to save her. And Hiroshi was not so weak that he would run away here.

—Even if I can't use magic, I can at least let Yukiko escape.

Hiroshi resolved himself for what had to be done. But then something happened that told him the situation would only grow worse. Something flesh-colored shot by in the corner of Hiroshi's vision.

—!

Keena was naked and sneaking up behind the perverted man. She had likely not heard the previous conversation. She still thought she was invisible. She walked right up to the man and reached out to snatch Yukiko from him.

If she had been invisible, she would likely have taken Yukiko and created an opening to attack. And since Hiroshi had known she could turn invisible, he could have used the chance to attack. However, the area's mana being absorbed meant Keena was completely visible.

—Aaaahhh…

Keena seemed to notice the worried look on Hiroshi's face. She held her thumb up in his direction as if to say, "Don't worry." And then she circled around to the front of the perverted man to swipe Yukiko from him.

"Hey," said the man.

Only then did Keena realize she was visible.

"Ehh!? Why!?"

The man used his open hand to swiftly grab Keena's wrist.

"I don't know what you're asking about, but why are you naked?"

"Noooo!"

Keena resisted, but the man was too strong for her. He grew overly excited and began speaking about his nonsensical ideas once more.

"Sneaking up behind someone in the nude!? Now that is art! You can join the ranks of nude artists! They have used nudity to bring peace, harmony, and – most importantly – confusion to the cities!"

As the perverted man laughed, he held Yukiko and Keena in his arms.

"Kyaaah!"

"Noooo!"

Yukiko and Keena cried out.

"Yukiko!" shouted Hiroshi.

"Onii-chan, help!"

"Ha ha ha! That would be reckless! And therefore I must insist you try it!"

The man looked over at Hiroshi.

Hiroshi could instinctually tell he was no match for the man. He could not use magic. The man was much bigger than him. And the man had known ahead of time that magic would be unusable. He would have a method of fighting without magic.

—Dammit…

The situation drove Hiroshi to despair. He felt the most despair over his own weakness. It was not that he did not have the courage to face the man. He had the courage to confront an opponent who was doing something truly unreasonable. However, he had always avoided situations that were greatly altered by how much power one had. And in doing so, he had wasted any opportunity he might have had to grow stronger.

"Onii-chan is a hero! He'll kick your butt right away!" angrily shouted Yukiko.

—No, I'm not.

Hiroshi silently denied it.

He was not powerful. If some powerful person decided something, he liked going along with it. Sacrificing his life for that was simple. However, he would rather die than make a decision that would affect someone else's life.

—I'm no hero.

Hiroshi stood in place.

The perverted man approached. Both of his hands were full, but Hiroshi did not move.

The man's long leg drew an arc through the air. A kick shook Hiroshi's head.

His vision flipped upside down. An instant after the world shook from the impact, he could only see the slanted ground before his eyes.

"Onii-chan!" cried Yukiko.

"So this is the so-called hero?" asked the perverted man. "But I'm here to stop that hero from being born. I will throw the plans of the hero's birth out of order. That is part of my job."

—Wh-what is he saying…? The plans? Come to think of it, did he also know the demonic beast would appear here…?

Those questions filled his head which seemed oddly calm. He may have reached a state of complete desperation. Hiroshi subconsciously stood back up.

"Excellent! You stood back up! That is how you show your recklessness!" The man kicked once more. "But it won't change the situation! After all, you're weak! You are bound by the common knowledge of this world! And that is because you do not understand art!"

The perverted man shouted out his personal opinion, but what Hiroshi found truly hard to bear was the next strike and the words that followed.

The man stood skillfully on one leg and sent a forward kick towards Hiroshi.

His heel jabbed into Hiroshi's solar plexus and Hiroshi doubled over.

The man then raised his leg up high with his heel still jammed into Hiroshi's gut. He lifted the boy up into the air.

The man's balance and physical strength were both excellent. Even while holding two girls, he managed to lift Hiroshi up on his leg.

"And you are not letting your true self show through. You are prepared to throw away your life to hide it. Sorry, but someone like that has no right to complain no matter what you do to them. You have no right to hold a grudge against me. Goodbye."

With that, the perverted man swung his raised leg.

Hiroshi flew through the air and landed in the lake.

"Onii-chan!"

"Hiroshi-kun!"

Yukiko and Keena cried out. Hiroshi made a violent splashing sound. And even once the ripples disappeared, he did not come back up to the surface.

The perverted man nodded in satisfaction when he saw that.

"Now then… I need to deal with the two of you."

Both Keena and Yukiko had lost even the willpower to scream.

The man grinned as he looked back and forth between the two girls in his arms.

"Which one should I start with?"

He sounded like he was looking forward to it, but then he looked off into the distance as if he had detected something.

"Tch. The demon king has begun moving sooner than expected. He must have come after his classmates. And if I'm going to eliminate them anyway, it would be more artistic to do so while he watches."

He then began walking while still holding a weakly resisting Keena and a limp Yukiko.

Part 3

The demonic beast left the lake and began moving toward the village. It seemed to be seeking the area with the greatest concentration of mana. It could be seen even from a great distance.

Akuto and Junko had headed out to search for Hiroshi. They were left speechless for a moment after seeing the demonic beast.

As soon as Akuto saw it, he felt a sort of uneasiness in his chest.

—That monster… I feel like it's calling for me…

"Wh-what is that? Do you know?" asked Junko when she noticed how Akuto was acting.

"No, I don't," he replied as he looked over toward her.

She looked extremely afraid. After all, this was a giant sea cucumber. She had already been completely traumatized by sea cucumbers.

"If you're afraid, you can head back. I'm still going to check what it is, though," he said.

Junko's expression stiffened, but she immediately shook her head.

"I will go, too. I will not be a hindrance…but…if possible…"

Her words had initially held great force, but they gradually ran out of steam. Akuto smiled as he watched her.

"It's fine. You don't have to force yourself."

"I-I am not!" she immediately denied before continuing in a quieter voice. "If…if you are with me, I think I can manage."

Akuto smiled again.

"Then let's go. I have a strange feeling about that monster," he said as he began walking.

By the time they had spotted the demonic beast, they had already made it quite a ways from the lodging facility. Akuto assumed heading straight there would be faster than heading back to the lodging facility to check on the situation.

However, Akuto came to a stop soon thereafter. On the other side of a small path through the forest was a tall man. He had dark skin, sunglasses, and a long white coat.

"Who are you?" Akuto asked cautiously.

The man was blatantly suspicious.

"I will give you the name I have given myself! I am Mister X!" cried out the perverted man.

The man's odd behavior left Akuto confused. And the ridiculousness of that name left him even more confused.

"…That is the name you gave yourself?" cut in Junko from the side.

"Watch out. He's probably a pervert."

"Silence! Honestly, you do not understand art at all!" shouted Mister X.

"Art?"

"Yes. I thought the demon king would have a better understanding of art."

As he spoke, Mister X stepped to the side. This revealed two hostages behind him.

"A-chan!" cried Keena.

She was nude and Yukiko stood beside her. They had collars on and Mister X held the other end of the chains attached to those collars.

"It looks like I didn't even need to ask who you are," said Akuto in a low voice.

His gaze was piercing straight into Mister X. Whether the man was a magician or not, this gaze seemed to hold enough heat to incinerate him. However, Mister X only grinned.

"You're mad. I love seeing emotions expressed like that."

"What did you do to Keena!?" shouted Junko.

"Nothing at all. For now. However, I thought I would let the demon king watch as I killed her. The boy I dealt with before you arrived just wasn't enough fun."

Mister X's mocking words caused Junko's face to pale. Keena had pursued Hiroshi and Hiroshi's little sister, Yukiko, was with her.

"It can't be…" The expression of anger had completely left Akuto's face. He asked a question in a gentle voice. "Are you saying you killed that boy?"

"Yes. Was he a friend of yours? I kicked him and kicked him and kicked him and then threw him into the lake. If he could swim he might not have died, but the way I kicked him, he wouldn't have the strength left to swim."

"Then let's go with that."

"What?"

"I'm saying I'll do the same to you. But there isn't enough water to drown in around here, so I'll need to borrow some stomach acid."

"What are you-…?"

Mister X was unable to finish his sentence. His body doubled over. Akuto had thrown a kick and buried his foot in the man's solar plexus.

"Gh…khah…"

Akuto drew back his foot and Mister X coughed up the contents of his stomach while bent over.

"I mean I'm going to shove your face in that!"

Akuto tried to throw another kick toward the back of Mister X's head.

However, Mister X jumped back to avoid it while still vomiting.

—!

The man's unexpected speed shocked Akuto.

And it seemed Mister X was just as surprised. After he was finished vomiting, he laughed in pure enjoyment.

"Hyaaaah ha ha ha ha ha! Amazing! You're faster than the data said and you have a shorter temper than the data said! Now this is art! I take back what I said! The demon king really does understand art!" Mister X pulled on the chains attached to Keena and Yukiko. "But this means I can't take care of these two without dealing with you first. I don't like using hostages, but if you don't-…"

Once more, Mister X was unable to finish speaking. Akuto moved even faster than before. He punched Mister X, sending the man's body flying several meters through the air.

"Guhaah!"

Mister X slammed into the ground.

"I would prefer not to get used to fighting, but I can't remain calm if I hear you killed my friend," said Akuto.

He easily broke the chains he had swiped at the same moment as punching the man.

"A-chan!" cried Keena as she embraced him.

He lightly stroked her head before breaking the lock to the two collars with his fingers.

"Wait here. I need to ask that man a few questions," he said.

However, Keena looked up at him worriedly.

"A-chan…"

"Hm? Don't worry. I'm not going to lose to the likes of-…"

"No."

"Eh?"

"Don't kill him."

Those words brought Akuto back to his senses.

—Not good. I didn't realize it until she pointed it out, but I was assuming it was only natural to kill him.

"I won't."

Akuto gave Keena a slight smile. He then removed his shirt, placed it over Keena, and turned toward Junko. She nodded and took Keena and Yukiko a short distance away.

Akuto then turned back toward Mister X.

"What is the goal behind all this nonsense?"

Mister X was only just managing to stand back up. He was still laughing. He appeared to be enjoying himself from the bottom of his heart.

"Oh, how amazing! No normal methods will cut it here!"

"What's so funny?"

"Experiencing art simply drives me insane! Don't you want to laugh at times like this!?"

"How should I know? And I'm asking you what you're trying to do here."

"Ha ha! You really know how to act stubborn! That too is art! And the answer to your question is quite simple."

Mister X pointed behind himself. The demonic beast could be seen advancing while letting out a roar.

"You need to sit by and watch that destroy the village. All I need to do is keep you here."

"What? What meaning is there in that?"

Akuto could not help but question that objective.

"Meaning? Even if there was any, I couldn't exactly tell you." Mister X sneered. "At any rate, I can't let you through here."

"You sure are full of yourself for someone who's been hit twice now. I won't kill you, but I'll make sure you can never laugh again."

Akuto took a step forward.

If he did not do anything, the demonic beast would attack the village. He had to break through here before that happened.

But then…

Junko shouted out after looking up toward a sound she had heard up in the air.

"Th-that is…!"

Akuto looked up. He could see his classmates flying through the blue sky. It was all of the students who took pride in their skill with flight magic. They had created a five-man formation. The demonic beast must have been visible from the lodging facility and the teacher must have given them permission to attack.

"So you want this monster to go on a rampage? Well, it looks like that won't happen. The others can handle it," said Akuto.

But when he looked back toward Mister X, the man's attitude had not changed in the slightest. Akuto found his unnatural lack of concern odd.

"Do you have other comrades here?" asked Akuto, but Mister X denied it.

"No. I simply know how this will turn out."

Without turning around, Mister X pointed at the demonic beast with his thumb.

"Ah!" gasped Junko.

The students flying toward it stalled one after another and then began falling to the ground.

"They were shot down? No, their mana…" Akuto quickly realized the demonic beast had absorbed their mana. "Does that demonic beast absorb all mana from its surroundings!?"

"Exactly. No magician can defeat it. It seems the sea cucumbers of this island gain that characteristic when they become a demonic beast. Isn't it truly wonderful? The threat of nature is art!"

"You want to destroy the village that badly? No, wait…"

Akuto's thoughts raced through his head.

—What purpose does he have behind destroying the village? I doubt his goal is the destruction in and of itself. This place wouldn't have any value. In that case, is using a demonic beast his goal? But if it absorbs mana, he can't be controlling it. So if he doesn't want me to approach it…

An answer occurred to Akuto.

"That means I have the power to oppose that monster."

With that realization, he also realized the identity of the strange feeling he had been feeling for a while now.

—I am feeling a kind of sympathy with that monster. I don't want to think about it, but there is some sort of connection between us!

"There is a connection between that monster and me… You want to make it look like I destroyed the village, don't you!?" shouted Akuto in realization.

"Correct." Mister X clapped his hands together. "But if you understand that much, you should just wait obediently here. We are simply advancing the situation in the direction you want. You truly are the demon king. You must accept that fact," said Mister X while grinning.

"To hell with that! I am not a demon king!" denied Akuto, but Mister X was not listening.

"You need to honestly show yourself in your life, but you have yet to realize it. You have not realized the truth hidden deep in your heart. We are simply helping draw that out. We are making you honest."

"Don't act like you understand me."

Even as he yelled back, Akuto noticed an unpleasant feeling inside him. It was the feeling of realizing something he did not want to realize.

—Either way, someone who wants to set me up as the demon king is behind this. And whoever put together this plan would have needed to know a lot of things ahead of time. Could they predict the future…?

"Who are you working for? With Korone's dismissal and all the other preparations needed, I can only think the imperial government is involved. Also, the system that predicted I would become a demon king is related to all this too, isn't it?"

"Do you really think I can answer that? But you have excellent instincts. You will make a wonderful demon king."

"Shut up! In that case, I'll just have to get it out of you by force. And I will stop that monster too. Either way, kicking your ass will be easy."

Akuto charged forward.

"I don't think so!"

Mister X opened the front of his white coat.

"What?"

"A-a pervert?"

The sudden action surprised Akuto and made Junko blush.

However, what happened next was even more surprising. He wore normal clothes within the white coat, but the inside of the coat was lined with speakers which began producing a great din.

A chaotic collection of metal scraping together, electronic noises, and sampled voices was emitted.

"Noise…?"

"Ha hah hah! That's right! This is my noise music! This is the pinnacle of art and the ultimate music!" proclaimed Mister X confidently as his body began moving as if he was convulsing.

"Cut it out, you pervert!"

Akuto threw a punch toward Mister X. However, the man easily avoided the strike.

"What!?"

Akuto stumbled forward.

"Ha ha ha ha ha hah hah! Did you really think I would fight the demon king without taking some precautions!?"

"What do you-…?"

Akuto tried to confront Mister X, but the man was faster this time. His kick sank into Akuto's solar plexus.

"Gfh…!"

Akuto writhed in pain and agony. He could not breathe and he could feel his organs convulsing.

—Impossible… I can't focus my mana…

Normally, Akuto's body would have been reinforced with mana. No matter how much the man struck him, he would have been perfectly fine.

"This is the noise I have developed as an expert in anti-magician combat."

"Noise…?"

Akuto looked up.

"Yes. Noises one cannot predict throw one's heart into disorder. As long as you are listening to my music, you cannot use magic! No matter how small the magic is, you will be unable to concentrate enough to pull it off!"

Mister X did not go easy on Akuto. He sent another kick toward Akuto's solar plexus. Akuto crossed his arms in front of himself to block it, but the kick immediately shifted to target his face. He was knocked back and his back collapsed on the ground.

"And I love my noise! This is the ultimate music! That means I alone can strengthen my body with magic!"

Akuto was barely able to stand back up, but a roundhouse kick flew toward him as soon as he did. He somehow managed to jump back and out of range, but Mister X continued to spin and sent a back roundhouse kick toward him. This one perfectly caught Akuto in the gut.

"And I have trained in martial arts so I can fight even without magic! When faced with my art, even the demon king can only crawl across the ground!"

As if to make a point that this was the final blow, Mister X put all of his strength into the next kick. Akuto's head collapsed to the ground.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto!"

Keena and Junko shouted out.

Mister X laughed.

"Don't worry! The demon king is the one person I won't kill! I must have this village destroyed and then pin the blame on him! And that means I need to kill everyone who saw me here!"

As Mister X turned to look at Keena and Junko, Junko took a fighting stance with a nervous look.

"Junko-chan…" said Keena worriedly.

"It was always assumed I could use magic, but I have been trained in martial arts more than the average person. I can do this," said Junko.

However, she could not hide the trembling in her legs.

Mister X began walking forward.

"I almost feel sorry for you. I can tell from that stance alone that you can't defeat me. Now, it is not artistic to hurt someone so one-sidedly, but let's do this."

Part 4

Even as Hiroshi sank into the lake, he was still conscious.

—I hate to admit it, but I really was trying to hide my weakness…

Even in this situation, his mind was filled with nothing but regrets targeted toward himself.

He had not grown stronger. In fact, he had wanted to avoid the responsibility growing stronger would have placed on him. In the end, he had used every excuse he could to continually run away.

—Yukiko…

His little sister's face and her words floated up in the back of his mind.

"Onii-chan, you're a hero, right?"

He had denied it because he did not want to be mocked by everyone. He had not wanted to bear such great expectations and responsibility. However, that had betrayed Yukiko's expectations. Whether he believed in the legend or not, he had still betrayed her expectations.

—Aniki…

Akuto's face floated up in his mind.

His expectations for Akuto had all been for his own convenience. He had hoped he could remain weak if he stayed with Akuto. Whether he believed in the legend or not, he had still forced his selfish expectations onto Akuto.

He had believed he was safe if he forced himself into a position below his actual ability. That was what he had done all this time.

And this was the result.

He opened his eyes. Images of the blue lake filled his eyes. The water was quite still.

—Can I really let myself drown here? If I could only swim, I might be able to do something!

Hiroshi struggled.

—I want to swim! I was an idiot to think I didn't need to know how to swim!

As he struggled in pain, Hiroshi realized he had been in this place once before. He was near the entrance to the cave leading to the shrine. He could see the hole leading from the water to the surface.

—Instead of sticking with jobs that didn't require swimming, I should have just learned to swim! And I can do that now! I can still change that now!

He decided where he needed to go. He desperately paddled at the water and toward the cave. He was beginning to lose consciousness, but the water current helped him. The water was flowing toward the cave.

Once he reached the area of the cave with oxygen, Hiroshi sucked in a deep breath.

He was still alive.

He resolved himself within that dark cave that was only large enough for a single person to pass through.

—I will be reborn. I will grow stronger.

He began to walk.

Everything matched his memories. As he headed through the cave, he saw a light. That proved the cave connected to the outside.

And he found a shrine partway through. It enshrined the stone with the sword stabbed into it as the proof of the hero.

Hiroshi stood before the shrine. It was only as tall as he was. The proof of the hero within was smaller than what one would normally call a sword and the stone was small as well. It looked more like a knife stabbed into a rock.

Hiroshi reached for it. He pulled it. It did not come out. What looked like a normal rock actually sank deep into the ground.

—Can I really not become the hero?

No matter how much strength he used, it would not budge.

—Is deciding to become strong not enough?

Just as he was about to give up, a new thought naturally formed that denied the past thought.

—No, that isn't it. I already am the hero. That's what I need to believe.

He strongly gripped the sword once more.

—I am the hero. I don't become the hero once I pull this out.

He felt the sword come out.

—I already am the hero. I just don't have the power to match yet.

"And I will be getting that power now," muttered Hiroshi.

And a voice responded.

<Authorization complete. Welcome, Brave.>

—Eh?

The voice had clearly come from the sword. It had come from that sword that was no larger than a knife.

"What…?"

Hiroshi was confused and then the knife began to change form in his hand. The blade opened up like a rhinoceros beetle spreading its wings and a mechanical construction could be seen within. As he watched in surprise, it wrapped around his wrist.

"Wah!"

The transformation quickly ended. It had become a bracelet around Hiroshi's wrist.

<I am anti-magic combat unit D13. Please designate an activation command. The default is Brave. If you do not wish to change it, please say "Brave".>

"Brave?"

<Command authorized. Please perform an activation test. Repeat "Brave" as the command.>

To Hiroshi's surprise, he could hear the voice directly in the back of his mind. However, it was subtly different from magical telepathic communications. For one thing, the area should not have held any mana. And his body's internal mana had been absorbed as well.

—Is this the power of the hero? An anti-magic combat unit?

Hiroshi spoke a single word.

"Brave."

<The unit will now activate. Creating dimensional fault. All foreign substances within the space 5 cm from the user will be eliminated.>

With a slight bursting noise, light surrounded Hiroshi's body.

"Wah!"

<Transferring main unit body. Transfer will take 0.2 seconds. Transfer complete.>

Hiroshi had no idea what had happened. However, after an instant of brightness, he realized his vision was surrounded by something translucent.

—It's like there's a visor over my eyes.

As soon as he realized he now had a helmet on his head, particles of light displayed on the visor before his eyes. They formed words. He could see a translucent display floating before his eyes.

<Electrical components functioning normal. Life support system functioning normal. Outside air circulation mode selected. Activation of nuclear fusion engine awaiting mental input.>

The words he heard in the back of his mind were the same as the ones floating before his eyes.

—So am I wearing some kind of suit?

To check on that, Hiroshi walked outside and looked at his reflection in the surface of the lake.

He was wearing a helmet that left his mouth visible. No one would recognize him while he was wearing it. He appeared to be wearing a skintight riding suit, but he had no clue what material it was made of. Parts bulged out at the wrists and they had a few holes on them.

—Are these weapons?

He held his hand in front of his face. It looked dangerous as if it had weapons built within. He twisted his head around and saw another weapon-like bulge on his back.

—What is this?

When he thought that, the voice spoke once more.

<Displaying the manual. For help, send mental input to the dolphin in the bottom right.>

The words displayed themselves on the screen. This time, a dolphin character appeared in the bottom right.

—That thing looks annoying.

As soon as he thought that, the dolphin disappeared.

<To activate the weaponry, the nuclear fusion engine must be activated. To activate the nuclear fusion engine, please provide mental input.>

—I see. Mental input means I just have to think and it will act. And the nuclear fusion engine must be…

<This unit can function in areas without mana. It can also absorb and destroy mana. It is guaranteed to be useful in anti-magic combat.>

—It's an isolated unit that doesn't need mana!

Hiroshi was excited.

—With this, I can handle that perverted man and that demonic beast!

Part 5

"…It is not artistic to hurt someone so one-sidedly, but let's do this," said Mister X as he approached Junko and the others.

His coat was still open.

Junko took a fighting stance while sweat beaded on her forehead.

"Junko-chan," said Keena worriedly.

It was blatantly obvious that she could not win, but she put on a strong front.

"Shut up! I do not want to die while he is watching. I do not want either of us to die!"

Keena understood that "he" referred to Akuto. She gave a powerful nod. Akuto must have heard their conversation because he stood up behind Mister X.

"Don't you dare turn your attention elsewhere while I can still move," he said.

Mister X turned around and laughed happily.

"You did it! This was unexpected! Everything unexpected is wonderful art!"

"If you love unexpected things so much, don't work according to a plan. I don't know what all has been set up with these predictions and whatnot, but I have a message for your superior," said Akuto quietly as he took a fighting pose.

"I don't like predictions either. Even so, I have to do this. Even so, there are some uncertain elements mixed in and chaos is coming. That isn't gonna make me happy!" Mister X grinned. "Now, you've managed to stand, but

do you have a countermeasure? I hope you'll let me enjoy this. After all, I can't finish you off."

Hearing that, Akuto covered his ears with his hands.

"Hah hah! An excellent idea! Do you think you can win if you can't hear my noise?"

Mister X advanced toward Akuto and threw a kick, but Akuto was unable to block it. He was knocked back and his hands were knocked from his ears.

"Gh!"

"Just not hearing it isn't enough! My noise is also a vibration you can feel in your entire body! That is the sign of top-rate noise! I can produce my noise without making any sound! You must have felt it! In the forest last night, I made a copy of the characteristic vibration of your internal mana!"

While swinging his legs around, Mister X began a bizarre convulsing dance. He bent his body, cried out, and spun around.

—I see. That's what that headache last night was.

Akuto recalled what had happened when he had gotten Yukiko involved. That had been Mister X's doing. But even if he understood that now, the problem lay elsewhere.

—Dammit. Is there nothing I can do about this?

Akuto lay on the ground and stared up into the sky. He could see the demonic beast rampaging out of the corner of his eye. Distant screams of the villagers were mixed in with the annoying noise. The demonic beast was likely crushing the village. He could see flames below it. The village likely had skillful fighters, but they could do nothing while they could not use their mana. His classmates had likely fled. The demonic beast rampaged without restraint and caused as much destruction as possible. It was like looking at an image of hell. And part of the blame lay on his shoulders.

—As long as I can still move, I need to do something.

Akuto tried to move his fingers and succeed. He knew he had to do something, but he did not have the strength left to stand.

—But there's nothing I can do even if I could stand.

He had to think up a plan first, but the noise prevented him from concentrating. His irritation continued to grow. The surrounding destruction, the irritation of being unable to do anything, and the fear all made him want to scream.

Mister X seemed to have once more chosen Junko and Keena as his targets. Akuto could see the pervert slowly approaching them.

—I need to protect those two no matter what. Keena approached me normally despite everyone calling me a demon king and Junko actually understands me. I can't afford to lose them.

Despite Mister X trying to kill them, Keena and Junko both looked more worried about Akuto.

As he saw their expressions, a sudden idea came to him.

—That's it!

"Wait."

Akuto stood up.

Mister X turned around in surprise.

"You can still stand!? But this is growing annoying. A refrain of the same phrase is not noise! And that means it isn't art!"

"Heh heh… Heh heh heh… Ha ha ha… Ah ha ha ha ha…"

Akuto's shoulders shook as he began laughing.

"What?" said Mister X suspiciously.

But Akuto's laugh only grew.

"Hyaa hah hah ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Wh-why are you laughing!?"

Mister X started to look panicked.

After laughing some more, a fearless grin appeared on Akuto's lips.

"I understand what this noise you speak of is. It's your music and the cry of your soul."

"Th-that's true, but what does it matter if you understand?"

"It means I can act without issue as long the cry of my soul is greater than yours," boldly declared Akuto.

But the look of panic disappeared from Mister X's face. A smile of relief replaced it before he began sneering at Akuto.

"If that was enough to get rid of my noise, I would never bother with this! Countless people have said the same thing just before I defeated them! My noise is unpredictable!"

"What does it matter if it's unpredictable? Predictable or not, I just have to drown it out with my own voice! I don't know if you should call me a demon king or not, but I know who I am. I will not concede any more ground where that's concerned. If I don't like something, I'll knock it out of my way. And I really don't like you."

Akuto began to advance.

"It's no use! Drown in a sea of noise!"

Mister X sent a few kicks toward Akuto. Every single one struck Akuto. In fact, Akuto did not even try to avoid them.

"I will destroy you and bury you in the earth! No matter how much you beg or cry, that is what I have decided!" shouted Akuto.

The look on Mister X's face changed. The sensation coming from his leg was clearly not right. Akuto's body felt harder than metal.

"You can control your magic power!?"

"That's right! I should thank you. Those cries of your heart taught me the truth. But that doesn't mean I won't kick your ass!"

Akuto spoke so loudly his entire body vibrated and that negated the noise.

"Tchhh!"

Mister X raised the volume of his noise, but Akuto only began shouting even louder.

"Just give it up! I will beat you to the ground for every time you kicked me!"

Akuto's strike slammed into Mister X's face.

The man rotated through the air before his back slammed into the ground.

"Gahaah!"

Mister X let out a painful gasp, but once he began breathing again, he began laughing while lying on his back.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! I'm so glad you understand art. But whatever you might say, I am working for a greater goal. That goal is the greatest form of art. I'm sure you'll love it! It is war and war and war! That is the ultimate representation of art. All art that reverberates in the heart will produce war. As the demon king, you have always been that type of person. Even if you try to escape the destiny set up for you, you cannot change how you live your life. Most dictators throughout history have been charming geniuses who understood art. You are the same sort of person! Without even realizing it, you will send those around you to be sacrificed! Even now, you sacrifice a girl every time you try to force your way of thinking! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Mister X's words had likely been the last resort of a man who had accepted his defeat. However, they were enough to shake Akuto's resolve.

"Enough nonsense!" shouted Akuto, but his voice lacked the willpower from before.

While still lying collapsed on the ground, Mister X saw through that.

"I see. So that's your weak point. Not only do I have my noise, but I have the advantage in psychological warfare."

Mister X raised his head.

Mister X's words had reminded Akuto of Korone.

—Someone had to make a sacrifice because of me…

As Akuto stopped moving, the effects of the noise took hold once more. Mister X stood up and attacked. Akuto's punch must have done a fair bit of damage because the attack lacked the force from before, but it was still more than Akuto could withstand. Akuto fell to a crouch.

Seeing that, Junko shouted, "Stop! I will face you!"

But her legs were trembling as she spoke.

Mister X shrugged as if he had had enough of dealing with them.

"I need to be leaving soon, so let's keep this simple. It may not be art, but I have no choice."

Mister X pulled an incantation gun from the pocket of his white coat. Junko could not use magic, so the weapon would be fatal against her.

Junko stood in front of Keena and Keena curled up while covering Yukiko.

When Akuto saw what was happening, he raised his head and shouted out.

"Stop!"

"Not doing what you tell me to is the true essence of noise."

Mister X pulled the trigger.

With the sound of the gun firing, the bullet flew toward Junko. The bullet contained explosion magic, so it burst before Junko and the others' eyes and flames swallowed them up.

Akuto let out a voiceless cry.

But…

"Simply pathetic. You truly cannot do anything without me around," said an unconcerned voice as if from nowhere.

"Wha-…Who was that?" asked Mister X in confusion.

Akuto recognized the voice.

"K-Korone… You came back?"

"Yes, I have returned."

Korone suddenly appeared from amid the flames. With a single wave of the cloak-like cloth she held, the flames and smoke disappeared. Junko and the others were curled up and unharmed behind Korone.

"With this disaster prevention cloak on hand, you can rest easy," announced Korone as she held the disaster prevention cloak up above her head.

"Korone!"

"Korone-chan…!"

When Junko and Keena called out to her, Korone turned around and expressionlessly gave the V-sign.

"To make a long story short, I have returned after making a plea bargain." Korone then pointed toward Mister X. "CIMO 8 member codenamed Mister X. Your current actions are unrelated to those of the intelligence director. Ergo, I can act as Sai Akuto's observer by neutralizing you in order to protect him."

"That incantation bullet should have been enough to shoot straight through a L'Isle-Adam's head! How are you unharmed!?" asked Mister X in surprise.

"I am a special model," she said as she walked toward Mister X.

Mister X spread the front of his coat and sent his noise pouring over Korone.

"It is no use. That has no effect on me."

Korone continued toward Mister X.

"Tch!"

Mister X sent one of his prided kicks at Korone.

"It is no use." She blocked it with one hand. "I could handle this myself, but I think that should be Akuto-san's job."

Korone pulled a new tool out of her bag. She held the rod up high.

"Magical Bat! At first glance it looks like a normal metal bat, but it is actually a normal metal bat."

"What…?" said Akuto with a bitter grin, but that grin had regained its calm. "I don't need any tools. Just having you back has helped enough."

"I will explain everything later, but let me say one thing now. I never felt any painful emotions due to you. Nor will I ever."

"Now that I've heard that, I will be okay." Akuto had Korone step back as he stood before Mister X. "Let's continue this. I can't just leave this to a girl."

Akuto grinned and Mister X must have decided this was his last chance. He let out that bizarre cry once more and turned his noise to maximum output.

Akuto and Mister X clashed with jabs and kicks.

But the man was no match for Akuto now that he had gained the concentration to negate the noise.

Finally, the time came to put an end to Mister X's noise.

Akuto's strike slammed into Mister X's gut. He stopped shouting and the noise stopped from the speakers.

"I have lost… That was an excellent display of art. However, our plan was essentially a success. The villagers will spread fear of the demon king and you will ultimately be driven from the academy. Once that happens, you must choose between death and rebelling against the empire," said Mister X intermittently.

"That won't be a problem. After all, I'm not alone," said Akuto as he looked over at Korone and the others.

"Keh… You lady killer…"

With that last comment, Mister X collapsed.

"It is over."

Akuto looked up as Korone approached.

When he saw the look in her eyes, he finally relaxed. At the same time, embarrassing feelings welled up within him.

"S-so you managed to come back."

"Yes."

Korone nodded and her expression seemed to contain some joy.

"U-umm…"

Akuto was unsure what to say and Korone nodded again as if to say she understood everything.

"But before greeting me, you need to deal with that."

Korone pointed toward the demonic beast.

—That's right. That thing is still there.

Akuto watched as the demonic beast destroyed the village. It spewed what looked like bundles of white strings from the top of its cylindrical body. Those were its insides. It was not shaped like a sea cucumber for nothing. However, unlike a sea cucumber, the buildings struck by those insides began to dissolve along with them. It also seemed the regeneration rate of its insides was much greater than normal. It would spew more insides almost right away.

"Th-that thing…" said Junko in fear.

Yukiko began to cry as her hometown was destroyed and Keena tried to comfort her.

"We must hurry," said Korone.

Akuto nodded, but then he saw what looked like a shooting star cut across the daytime sky, moving toward the demonic beast.

—What is that?

Whatever it was, it was definitely headed through the sky for the demonic beast.

<Output is displayed in the gauge at the top left. If the energy transfer is too poor, the system must be reactivated. The main body battery holds enough energy for five minutes of flight time.>

As Hiroshi listened to that explanation, he began to realize that this suit was not a creation of a magical civilization. Unlike with mana, he could not feel power welling up in his body. While flying by controlling the mana of the atmosphere, it would feel like he was riding the wind. However, he now felt weightless as if he had been freed from gravity. Yet the overall style of the suit and the fact that it had clearly been created for a human to use made him doubt it had been created by some truly foreign civilization. He felt it may have been something researched before civilization began to assume everyone could use mana.

—How much power does this thing have?

Hiroshi had to wonder. Because he could not feel the power welling up within him, he could not instinctually judge his combat ability. But with the demonic beast below him destroying the village, he knew he had to do something.

—Can I really do this? I guess I have to try.

He had been planning to pursue the perverted man first, but the demonic beast was just about to crush his family's house. He could not just ignore that. His parents had moved away from the house and were firing a shotgun at the demonic beast. Needless to say, the gun was showing no sign of affecting the demonic beast at all.

Hiroshi accelerated in that direction. The suit had the ability to perform whatever action he imagined in his head. As the suit flew weightlessly, the distance between him and the demonic beast disappeared in no time at all.

—This thing's fast!

And he barely felt any burden on his own body.

—I can do this.

"Does this thing have any weapons?"

A voice answered Hiroshi's question.

<The right hand possesses a high frequency blade. By limiting the vibration, it can also be used as an anti-personnel striking weapon. It is

recommended for non-lethally neutralizing a target you wish to capture. The left hand possesses a monomolecular cutter. It can be used to slice through non-living things. It should only be used against a living thing if you intend to take the target's life. This weapon also must be transferred in from the main body in another dimension. The back contains six lasers. Each one can be fired individually. Energy for all six shots must be transferred in simultaneously. One minute is needed before they can be fired again. That covers the standard equipment. For further options, please view the following link.>

"I get the gist of it."

Hiroshi flew across in front of the demonic beast. He was trying to draw its attention. He did not know where its eyes were, so he simply cut by in the direction he had been approaching from.

And it seemed the demonic beast noticed him. Its cylindrical body twisted around to point its head toward him.

—Yes, this way!

Hiroshi was satisfied that he had successfully lured the demonic beast. He glanced down toward his parents. His mother looked shocked, but his father did not. He was looking up at Hiroshi with a somehow calm expression.

—He knew something, didn't he?

However, Hiroshi did not have time to think on that. The demonic beast spewed its white string-like insides from its mouth.

—There!

Hiroshi avoided them. He was amazed how well the suit carried out the actions he pictured in his head.

—I could get used to this!

The insides moved around like independent life forms and pursued Hiroshi with almost entirely unpredictable movements, but the footage displayed on his visor covered the area behind him as well. Once he realized the area behind him was displayed like a rearview mirror, he managed to picture an image of the entire area 360 degrees around him. He could see the movements of the insides, so he could avoid them. The suit also seemed to have the ability to automatically avoid the ones that approached

more quickly. At some point, he had avoided a few of the insides he had not noticed. To those below, he guessed he looked like a line of light weaving through the gaps between the tentacle-like insides.

—Laser!

As soon as Hiroshi thought it, a glowing laser fired behind him from his back. It bent around like a snake raising its head in preparation to strike and then shot straight toward the demonic beast.

The demonic beast roared. A scorched area appeared over the leopard pattern on its skin and smoke rose up as its bodily fluids evaporated. Another laser swept across sideways, opening the wound further. The insides in the horizontally sweeping path of the laser were sliced apart and fell to the ground with smoke rising from them.

—Amazing!

Hiroshi was excited. But an instant later, he cooled down his own excitement.

—No, getting carried away isn't going to help. A mistake here could cause a lot of damage.

The demonic beast writhed in pain. This caused it to damage Hiroshi's family house. More insides fell and began dissolving other nearby houses.

—I need to end this right away.

"Are there any weapons for destroying large objects?"

<This unit has two types of anti-materiel weapons. Both are special options. The first is the nuclear fusion bomb. It can be transferred in and equipped. It will leave nothing but scorched earth in a radius of three kilometers. Please escape beyond three kilometers within five seconds of dropping it. It is recommended you drop it from three kilometers in the air. Any life forms within a five kilometer radius that do not have radiation shielding will also be in danger.>

"What's the other one?"

"High temperature plasma balls. Plasma is compressed in a field to form balls. The balls are expanded around the suit and as soon as they come into contact with the target, the field is released and the target is melted.

This weapon cannot be used with the suit's battery, so five minutes are needed before it may be used again.>

"Let's go with that one."

<Transferring heat-resistance cape.>

An instant later, a cape that looked like it was made of cloth appeared around the suit.

<Transferring plasma balls.>

Spheres of light appeared around the cloak. It seemed he simply had to bring those spheres to the enemy.

—In other words, I just have to charge into it like this.

Hiroshi looked down at the demonic beast writhing below. If he could fly in as if he was piercing straight through it, it seemed he could melt that sea cucumber monster using heat.

—Let's do this.

Hiroshi brought the suit up into the air and then reversed to accelerate down toward the demonic beast.

The cape flipped up behind him and the plasma balls began rotating around it. Finally, Hiroshi became a mass of fiercely rotating energy.

<Plasma ball fixation field in excellent condition. Time between contact and release set at one nanosecond. Lowering anti-flash visor's visible light passage rate from the current 23% to less than 1%. Expanding dimensional fault field. Contact with target in five seconds.>

He was rapidly approaching the demonic beast, but he was mysteriously without fear.

—So this is what it is like to have power.

That is what Hiroshi thought.

He became a mass of energy, charged down the demonic beast's mouth, and shot back up into the air not even a few seconds later. Hiroshi turned around to find the demonic beast had burst from the inside. Without even time to give one last roar, it evaporated and became a brown mass.

—With this, I can easily handle anyone!

Hiroshi felt a chill run down his spine. This power was clearly too much for him.

But…

—I can easily protect anyone now!

He looked down. The villagers were obviously exhausted as they looked up at him with a strange mixture of shock and relief. From that look, it was clear none of them had realized this mysterious flying hero was Hiroshi.

They were all thankful he had saved them but were also concerned about who the hero might be. Hiroshi felt he had to say something.

<To protect the suit's wearer, your voice can be altered.>

The suit must have read his thoughts because the support voice spoke up.

After a bit of hesitation, Hiroshi waved toward the villagers and called out to them.

"I am Brave, the legendary hero."

Despite being so far away, Akuto grasped what had happened. Someone who could fly despite not having any mana around had defeated the demonic beast.

"What was that?" asked Akuto to no one in particular.

Naturally, no one had an answer.

Junko, Keena, and even Korone could only watch on in shock.

"Could that have been the legendary hero?" muttered Junko.

Akuto could not deny the possibility.

"But does that mean the prediction was true?"

And in the next moment, something happened that left Akuto speechless as well. The hero flew toward them through the sky.

As the hero flew weightlessly, he landed in front of Akuto and the others.

It was a man wearing a helmet and a skintight bodysuit. He was short, but he had already demonstrated how powerful he was. Akuto's body tensed up.

"Who are you?" asked Akuto, but the hero did not answer.

As soon as the hero's gaze reached where Mister X was lying collapsed behind Akuto, the hero disappeared from Akuto's vision.

"Eh?"

Akuto checked around him, but it was too late by the time he found the hero again. The hero kicked Mister X high up into the air. Mister X was still breathing, but he had been left completely powerless. He now flew high into the sky.

—Not good!

Akuto tried to stop it, but there was nothing he could do. In the next instant, the hero disappeared from the surface of the earth. He was now floating in the air next to Mister X. The hero then kicked Mister X to the side. Mister X flew far into the distance.

A distant splash was heard, so Mister X had likely landed in the ocean.

—Did he kill him?

Akuto instinctually felt that had been the intent.

"What are you doing!?"

Anger instantaneously welled up within him. Akuto disliked killing no matter the reason.

Akuto took long strides toward the hero when he landed once more.

Akuto and the hero glared at each other.

As Junko watched on, she panicked because she had never felt this atmosphere before. For better or for worse, the tension between Akuto and the people he had fought before had been a heated one in which one sent everything at one's opponent. However, the tension between these two was a chilled one that made it seem something truly irreversible would be done if a fight broke out.

"Why did you attack him?" asked Akuto.

"I gained this power out of my desire to protect everyone. If I did not eliminate him, I could not protect this island," replied the hero.

Akuto felt an intense opposition to those words.

"You're wrong. There had to be a better way."

After that, the two continued to face each other silently.

"Ah!" cried Yukiko after staring blankly at them up to that point.

She had realized who the hero was from his body shape, his mannerisms, and his actions. However, that voice caused the tension between the two of them to burst. Akuto and the hero's right fists crossed.

A dry sound rang out.

Akuto's right fist was blocked by the hero's left hand.

The hero's right fist was blocked by Akuto's left hand.

Eventually, both of them moved back.

The hero silently floated upwards. And as Akuto watched on, he flew up and disappeared into the blue sky.

—Is it…over?

Akuto looked at the others. Junko and Keena were showing looks of relief. Korone stood next to them. The only person missing was Hiroshi.

—Don't tell me he's actually dead…

As soon as that thought entered Akuto's mind, he heard a voice he had thought he might never hear again.

"Anikiii! Yukikooo!"

Akuto looked over.

Hiroshi was running toward them waving his hand.

"Onii-chan!"

A broad smile spread across Yukiko's face. She ran out toward Hiroshi.

"You're alive. Thank goodness."

Akuto watched Hiroshi and Yukiko hug as he sat down on the ground in relief.

Korone then moved in front of him. She lent a hand to help Akuto up and then wrapped her arms around Akuto's waist in an embrace.

"It was not easy getting back here, you know?" she said with upturned eyes.

Her tone of voice contained a hint of teasing, but Akuto guessed that was simply meant to hide her embarrassment.

"I know. You want me to praise you, don't you?"

Akuto placed a hand on Korone's head.

Chapter 5: The Trouble Still Isn't Over?

"That was amazing! I wonder who it was!"

Keena spoke excitedly with Yukiko on the way back to the village.

Yukiko looked back at Keena with a look in her eyes that said, "Does she really not know?" It seemed Keena really did not know.

Hiroshi returned to the village along with Yukiko and Keena. He had brought Keena as well because he thought she might have realized his secret, but it seemed that had been an unnecessary concern. He wanted to keep the suit a secret from those in the school.

Hiroshi faced his parents in front of their destroyed house.

"Dad…"

When Hiroshi approached, his father left Yukiko and Keena with Hiroshi's mother and brought Hiroshi behind the destroyed house. After being sure that no one was listening, he took Hiroshi's hand.

"That was you, wasn't it?"

Hiroshi silently nodded and his father began telling him a secret.

"That was left by your grandfather. He is also the one who left the legend. However, not even he knew the details. A man who mysteriously appeared on the island left the suit and legend with him and then disappeared. The man told him someone from his bloodline would eventually use the suit. I also saw the suit when I was younger, so I had no choice but to believe it."

"But doesn't that mean someone with actual predictive ability was behind this?" asked Hiroshi in confusion.

"I don't know. After all, real precognition is supposed to be impossible. I do not know if that man randomly chose our family or if there really is a bloodline of the hero. But given how dangerous that suit is, I had no choice but to continue protecting the legend. This will probably put a burden on you, but you are now the only one who can use it. It is up to you to decide how you use it."

Having said that, Hiroshi's father saw him off.

Even when asked by the people of the island, Hiroshi's father never admitted that Hiroshi was the hero. Eventually, the villagers stopped asking, but they also stopped mocking Hiroshi behind his back.

When Yukiko arrived to say goodbye before Hiroshi returned to the academy, she looked like she wanted to say something. Hiroshi rubbed her head and told her, "Keep it a secret." That seemed to get his point across.

But Hiroshi was not in a good mood. It bothered him that he had been forced into a conflict with Akuto over how to deal with Mister X. First of all, this power was too much for him. There was also the prediction. It said the hero would ultimately defeat the demon king.

—That will never actually happen. After all, I just have to never fight aniki.

Hiroshi tried to brush away his gloomy mood with that thought.

But one thing still bothered him: his father had told him the name of the man who had brought the suit to the island.

Apparently, that man's name was Yamato Bouichirou.

"…and that is how I managed to return."

After they returned to the lodging facility, Korone had explained everything. Hiroshi was still visiting his family with Keena. Only Korone, Akuto, and Junko were in Akuto's room.

The situation could be summed up as follows: Korone had learned of the rumors concerning the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office, so she had realized who was attacking Akuto in the forest. She had gone to the Cabinet Office and used that information to threaten the intelligence director who was her superior. The intelligence director had been unaware of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office's actions. He had seen no option but to apologize and reinstate Korone and the Church of Markt's right to observe Akuto.

"It seems someone was controlling the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office from the shadows. This is quite a problem, so some more political bargaining like this will likely be held in secret."

Akuto had not understood most of what she had said, but it seemed different parts of the government were arguing whether the commotions caused by Akuto were a political matter or a matter of public order.

However, that alone did not explain how Korone had been acting in the forest.

"Then why were you dismissed in the first place?" he asked.

Korone nodded and replied, "Most of this was resolved, but one matter still remains."

"Eh?"

"From what I was told in the Cabinet Office, it seems you have learned what I was ordered to do. From what I was told, the academy made an official protest. It must have leaked via Etou-san."

"Then the whole seduction thing is over?"

"That is not yet over. I still have my orders and I do not intend to change my plans."

"Eh?" Akuto could not help but be surprised by this. "But if I know about it, it will never work."

When Korone heard that, she asked a question.

"Are you sure you are not making some sort of misunderstanding?"

"Misunderstanding?"

"Yes. The plan is to control you with a woman. Even if it has been revealed, you only need to be interested in the individual," said Korone seriously.

"But I've already told you I will not be interested in you when I know it's for this," said Akuto.

Korone immediately rebutted with, "That is the misunderstanding. I was only attempting to sexually educate you as you know little about having a relationship with a woman. I am not the intended partner."

"What?"

Akuto was left speechless.

Korone went on to say, "The plan was to have you marry someone from an excellent family. Now that it has been revealed, I will ask you directly.

Akuto-san, please marry Junko-san. A marriage interview can be prepared for you next month."

"Wha-…?"

"Eh…?"

Both Akuto and Junko's expressions stiffened. Whether she had noticed this or not, Korone continued speaking.

"From your actions in the forest, I thought you were in love with Keena-san, so I thought I had failed. Keena-san is not from an important family, so a relationship with her would not change the current situation. However, it seems that has advanced no further. In that case, I must ask you to marry Junko-san and join her family. That will resolve everything. If you cannot forget Keena-san, then you can take her as a mistress. You will likely be allowed that much freedom."

Korone sounded completely calm as she said such outrageous things.

Akuto was still confused, but he quickly realized the meaning behind all of Korone's strange actions.

—But…

He glanced over at Junko. For some reason, she was sitting seiza style with her mouth pressed tightly in a single straight line. As soon as she noticed he was looking at her, her mouth began twitching as if it was convulsing.

"H-hey, could you stop saying such ridiculous things?" Akuto said.

Junko then began mumbling and nonsensical words escaped her lips.

"Hyah…hyoh…nyoh…M-m-marriage?"

Junko looked over at Akuto, looked like she had no idea what to say, suddenly screamed, and ran out of the room.

"W-w-waaahhh!"

"W-wait!"

Akuto was unable to stop her.

After fleeing, Junko sat worrying alone in front of the vending machine corner of the café room.

—Marriage? M-m-m-m-m-m-marriage?

She had never even considered it. The Hattori family usually risked their lives serving VIPs of the country, so very few of them had happy households. The eldest child would be given a political marriage and the other children would normally give everything they had to some important person. And when the important person who became their master was of the opposite sex, it could only become a perverted relationship of patiently enduring their love. And the household teachings of the Hattori family instructed them to do so.

It was true that Junko would unintentionally begin thinking about Akuto before going to sleep at night, but her standard fantasy was a twisted one of feeling she was protecting Akuto while hiding under his bed to feel his body heat as he slept.

—If I marry him, I will not be under his bed. I will be lying next to him. N-next to him…

Junko was feeling horribly shaken, so she bought a drink to help calm herself down. While breathing heavily, she drank down the contents of the paper cup all at once.

—No, married couples do more than just lie next to each other… They go beyond that by-…

Junko began choking on the drink and writhed about atop her chair for a full five minutes.

The classmates watching her from afar assumed she was troubled because Akuto had done something else that would hurt the academy's reputation.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do now?"

After Junko had fled, Akuto complained to Korone.

But Korone remained calm.

"This will resolve everything. Is there a problem?"

"Well…what about our feelings?"

When Akuto asked that exceedingly natural question, Korone suddenly smiled.

—Eh?

This caught Akuto off guard.

"I have feelings, too. However, I am able to suppress them," she said.

Her expression was a lively one filled with emotion.

Akuto was left speechless and Korone brought a hand up to her mouth. She then blushed and fidgeted as if she was having difficult saying something.

"These orders are hard for me too. After all, I really do lo-…"

Korone's expression was one of a girl in love. Akuto was so shocked he froze in place and Korone brought her face in towards his. She stuck her lips out slightly and brought them in toward his.

And just before their lips touched…

"So this is the sort of approach you like," spoke Korone coldly as she returned to her usual expressionless look.

"Wait… You were teasing me!?"

Akuto blushed and stood up.

Expression returned to Korone's face as she smiled.

"Heh heh heh… Just a little joke."

Her smile was all too natural.

Akuto had no idea what to do other than forgive her.

Afterword

Thank you for coming back once more. This is Mizuki Shoutarou. As I write this afterword, it is the middle of summer. It's so hot I am drinking chilled amazake as I write this. This is another type of rice juice.

Here is Volume 3. I think it is in a large part thanks to Itou-san's illustrations, but this series has become rather popular. That has allowed me to bring plenty of developments into the story. I apologize to those picking this book up at a later date, but a manga version starts serialization in Champion RED (published by Akita Shoten) starting with the issue released in September of 2008. It is being written by Itou Souichi-san himself. This is a manga version by the illustrator of the original, so even I could not be more excited. I have been rolling around in my room wishing the days could go by quicker. Then again, Itou-san will have a harder time of it if the days do go by quicker, so I need to start rolling around more slowly.

There is also something else in the works that I cannot announce yet. Depending on the time you are reading this, it might have already been announced, but please look forward to it.

Now, time to discuss something pointless.

While writing this novel, I was listening to noise music. I can only describe it as amazing. Screams and electronic noises that I cannot describe in text were blaring from the speakers. It was of course quite annoying, but when I put up with it long enough, I actually started to grow sleepy. When you listen to most songs, you follow the rhythm in your head, but you can't do that with noise. With noise that you cannot comprehend, your brain gives up trying to listen to it and you grow sleepy. Out of curiosity, I watched footage of a concert. It had the amazing description of "due to exhaustion from the shouting and intense movements, the concert can last no longer than five minutes". They really did convulse and jump about. I tried to copy it and hurt my neck. I assumed the noise musician had to be fine because he trains for it, but I checked on some information on the artist and he said it hurts him too. Noise music is dangerous!

Anyway, I was impressed by the noise, so I would like to write a noise light novel one day. Something that could last no longer than five pages. But I

can't think up anything I could write, so I get the feeling that "one day" will never come.

Now, about the novel.

Then again, this is yet another one that needs no explanation. I do have a warning though: "Don't try the actions depicted in this novel at home." Specifically, don't try to make the rice juice or do any of the perverted actions. Either one will get you arrested. You say you would never do anything perverted? Yes, I supposed you wouldn't. But there must be some types of perverted actions people just want to do outside. The other day, I saw an elementary school kid walking through a stream shouting obscene words. He might become something like a mudskipper in the future.

I know it's weird coming after that, but it's time to thank people.

First, my illustrator Itou Souichi-san. I know you're probably really busy now, but keep up the fight together. This time, Korone's expressions were especially great. I'm the one that came up with her personality yet even I couldn't help but be surprised she says such vulgar things with those expressions. Then again, there are elementary school kids who shout things while walking through a stream, so I suppose you can't judge vulgarity on looks alone. (Did I really just say that!?)

Next, my editor Ohashi-san. Once more, thank you for all your effort. I hope I can finish the next one with more time to spare. When people ask me if I intend to say that over and over again, I will answer no. Oddly enough, though, the work always takes so much time to complete. I will continue working while praying I will get faster at it. Some of you may have realized that I just said the exact same thing as in Volume 2. I am the embodiment of the author who never improves, but please do not abandon me.

Lastly, I give my thanks to everyone else involved. You have helped me in so many ways.

Now then, it looks like we can enjoy this together a lot longer!

References

1. ↑ In this volume, Korone has started using "watashi" to refer to herself. Previously, she would use "jibun" which can be seen as more detached.

Disclaimer

Under no circumstances would you be allowed to take this work for commercial activities or for personal gain. Baka-Tsuki does not and will not condone any activities of such, including but not limited to rent, sell, print, auction.

Credits

Story : Mizuki Shoutarou
Illustrator : Itou Souichi
Translator : Js06

Generated on Mon Jan 5 14:49:34 2015